

The new non-aligned: a return to Cold War diplomacy?

Blog post by Practice Director Jon Garvie, 10 June 2022

In a speech in London in late April, the British Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, declared that “faced with appalling barbarism and war crimes, which we’d hoped had been consigned to history, the free world has united behind Ukraine in its brave fight for freedom and self-determination”. Revealed positions do not support the rhetoric. In the UN General Assembly Vote which adopted a resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council, the countries which voted against the motion (China, North Korea, Iran, Syria and Vietnam) are closed societies. But the 58 which abstained include the world’s most populous democracies (India, Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa) as well as some of the West’s most important illiberal allies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt). Those abstaining countries are the targets of a sustained diplomatic campaign driven to various degrees by the US, UK, EU and Japan. But, so far, there have been no significant shifts in position.

This matters because underplayed global ambivalence towards the conflict has meant that the sanctions levelled against Russia have not proved as effective as they might have been. Russia’s revenues from oil exports between January and April climbed 50% year on year, and coal exports have followed the same trend. After China, India continues to be the most significant beneficiary of discounted Russian energy, augmenting its reliance on Moscow for military hardware. In Washington, Brussels and London, New Delhi is seen as the most important “swing” country in a new cold war, hence the ongoing commercial and diplomatic efforts to woo it, from invitations to attend the G7, Quad exercises in East Asia, revived promises of FTAs to deals on military equipment. President Biden is unlikely to exhibit the more values-driven foreign policy he promised towards Saudi Arabia when he visits Riyadh, asking for expanded oil production and clearer political alignment, in the coming months.

The hard truth is that, in most cases, reluctance to follow a Euro-Atlantic lead is a matter of both interests and worldview. In Africa and the Middle East, Moscow has increased its influence over the past decade, as the West has receded from view. The Malian government relies on Russian mercenaries to maintain its fragile hold. Russia’s de facto control over Syria airspace since 2015 has meant that Israel continues to hedge its bets, despite the furore over Lavrov’s comments about Hitler. And in regions such as Latin America and South-East Asia, where Russian hard power is weaker, there is at best lukewarm support for G7 positions. This derives partly from a refusal to favour Washington over Beijing, rather than Moscow; China’s economic diplomacy in those regions has been the most sustained and successful of any country over the past decade. But many nations also view moralistic condemnations as hypocritical. How do Russia’s efforts to protect its sphere of influence differ in principle from America’s historical record of subverting democracy in South America? Who determines the dividing line between war crimes in Mariupol and Fallujah? These arguments reflect both Moscow’s talking points and pre-existing views.

Those faultlines mean that diplomatic efforts over the next few months will accelerate on two interrelated fronts. The G7's best hope of convincing others to adopt its positions rests on the impacts of inflation. Russia's responsibility for rocketing food and fuel prices and resulting political instability offer the clearest interest-driven argument for aligning in condemnation of Moscow. But Russian responsibility is not widely accepted in the Middle East where calls for a ceasefire at all costs will increase, even on terms which neither Ukraine nor its backers are currently prepared to countenance. The US has yet to make an offer which will change the Egyptian government's calculations about the importance of the price of bread in Cairo relative to the ownership of territory in Donetsk. For all the talk of democratic vs autocratic decoupling, non-alignment is the cold war trend which looks most likely to persist.