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**OPINION**

## **Why Africa Doesn't Jump Into the Fray on Ukraine | Opinion**

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**A**fricans have learned the hard way that, as one of their proverbs puts it, "When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." Now that the East and the West are clashing again, many outside the continent fail to understand why Africa—an important part of "the rest" of the world—is reluctant to join the fray.

Much has been made of the fact that South Africa, "Nelson Mandela's country," tabled a resolution at the United Nations General Assembly to get humanitarian aid into Ukraine without labeling Russia as the invader. Even more has been made of the fact that, on March 2, only 28 among the 54 African countries—roughly one out of two—sided with the vast majority elsewhere in the world—four states out of five—that "deplored in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine." Do nations such as South Africa, Senegal, Namibia, Madagascar, Tanzania, or Algeria not at all care about territorial integrity and national sovereignty? Are they prepared to sacrifice the foundational principles of the international order for short-term gains provided by Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Africa is not a country but a continent, and situations vary. That Eritrea, an entrenched dictatorship, voted in support of Russia doesn't say more about Africa than Belarus' vote tells us about Europe. Nor should we be surprised that beleaguered regimes, such as the ones in Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, or Guinea back Russia, their foreign security provider thanks to the strong-armed ministrations of the "private" Wagner Group (which is also fighting for Putin in Ukraine). Finally, while there would be many losers in Africa if Russia became a pariah state, there would also be winners, first and foremost the producers of petroleum and liquified natural gas (LNG) like Nigeria and Algeria or, soon, Senegal and Tanzania. South Africa itself, as the world's second-biggest producer of palladium, a critical input into automobiles and electronics, would have to gain from the number one provider, Russia, being boycotted.

Still, there is a strong trend across the African continent to remain on the sidelines. But the real question is whether this preference translates to the pro-Russian stance of governments or, rather, the anti-Western feelings of their public opinions.

This brings us back to the grass that is fatally trampled. Egypt voted to condemn Russia's aggression though, more than any other country in Africa, it depends on Russian and Ukrainian grain imports for its daily bread. Other African states voted one way or another regardless of Russia being their main supplier of military equipment—and we should think twice before exalting the disruption of the arms trade as the triumph of good over evil. Not only are the United States, France and Great Britain the runners-up in arming Africa but, also, why would highly exportable African security concerns be always and automatically less legitimate than our own? More broadly, while claiming the moral high ground in its confrontation with Putin's imperialistic Russia, the West ought to remember that it's sitting atop the scrap heap of its own interventionist history. Much of that history is quite recent.

Africans are thus unlikely to have forgotten the highhanded manner in which Libya's Colonel Gaddafi was overthrown by the West in 2011, and the chaos left in the wake. Nor are they likely to ignore how many times since Africa's "independence," France has sent its troops into one of their capitals to replace a president fallen into disgrace in Paris—the last time, also in 2011, when French soldiers dislodged Laurent Gbagbo from his bunker in Abidjan and handed him over to rebels to make it look like "an African solution for an African problem." Well-connected as they are these days, Africans also know that the United States used state-sponsored misinformation—the purported existence of weapons of mass destruction—to give short shrift to Iraq's sovereignty in 2003. Moreover, they have seen the recently released videos showing American elite soldiers in their safe command centers on the Arabian Peninsula raining drones on civilians in Afghanistan as if death and destruction were only a video game.

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Is this to say that Africans tend to establish a moral equivalence between all wars and war crimes, wherever they happen and whoever commits them, to simply call it a wash? Not at all! From my many interactions over the past weeks with Africans in general, and their leaders in particular, I retain three messages that, I believe, have so far failed to fully register with the outside world.



A woman makes posters before joining other protestors standing outside the South African Parliament as a show of support for the Ukrainian people, protesting against Russia's invasion into Ukraine, and calling for the South African government to condemn the action of the Russians, in Cape Town on March 15, 2022.

RODGER BOSCH/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

First, I haven't met anyone in any position of responsibility who has not unequivocally condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine as a matter of principle. It is precisely because Africa's territorial integrity and sovereignty have so often been trampled upon that the continent's citizens want them to be inviolable—but also know that they are not.

Second, my African interlocutors, given their own painful experience of indifference, have invariably remarked on the Europeans' rediscovery of the traumas of war and the misery of civilians buffeted by its violence as the ugly face of history, and not

something that "only happens to others." The warm welcome that Eastern European countries, namely Hungary, have extended to Ukrainian refugees has not gone unnoticed among the unwanted in the world's safe havens.

Last but not least, inasmuch as geopolitics ought to operationalize a shared responsibility for the international order, Africans increasingly question the West's overbearing leadership in world affairs and its double-standards in conducting them. Why, for instance, should a breach of rules in Europe, as egregious it may be, polarize the entire planet and divide it into two hostile camps while injustice and suffering elsewhere on the planet regularly don't? Is there only room for mediation or silent diplomacy when the grey area for realpolitik or action behind the scenes can be arrogated for themselves by Western powers? Also, is it fair to expect the Global South to suffer twice over from globalization, first by being violently drawn into it and then by being gang-pressed to dismantle it overnight?

Finally, isn't the lesson learned from past sanctions inflicted on "rogue states" that they rarely work, and more often than not hurt ordinary people than help remove undesirable leaders? If so, why should Africa, arguably the weakest link of the international chain, try to tie down Russia today, and perhaps, tomorrow China?

I don't pretend that there are obvious answers to all these questions. But I do understand why Africans are posing them. Their views are telling us something important not only about their continent, home to nearly 1.4 billion people, but also about ourselves. In proverbial brevity: "Tell me where you live, and I tell you how you see the world."

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*