

The Case for Neutrality: Understanding African Stances on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Introduction

In March 2021, Russian armed forces began deploying thousands of military personnel and equipment near Russia's borders with Ukraine, with another contingent deployed in Crimea which was annexed by Russia in 2014.² The scale of this military build-up, which represented the largest force mobilisation by Russia since its annexation of Crimea in 2014, came as a surprise to Ukraine and a source of concern to other European countries and the United States. Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu stated that the military deployment was in response to "threatening NATO

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² Matthew Funaile and Joseph Bermudez, "Unpacking the Russian Troop build-up along Ukraine's border," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russian-troop-buildup-along-ukraines-border>

actions” and “unjustified build-up” close to the Russian border.³ The NATO action that Russia was referring to was *Defender Europe 2021*, which was one of the largest US-Army-led military exercises in Europe since the end of the cold war, involving 28,000 troops from 27 nations engaged in simultaneous operations across 30 training areas in 12 countries.⁴ The exercise, which was carried out over a four-month period, spanned the Balkans to the Black Sea region with some of the key training grounds in Europe, Asia, and Africa.⁵ The main aim of *Defender Europe 21*, according to the exercise fact sheet was to build “operational readiness and interoperability with a greater number of NATO allies and partners over a wider area of operations.”⁶

After deployment in March, in April 2021, Russia began to withdraw some of its troops but with the defence minister urging the troops to stay alert and ready for an immediate response in case of “unfavourable developments.”⁷ Meanwhile, NATO continued its military exercises until June 2021. Although Russia had withdrawn most of its forces by May 2021, troops continued to be shifted back and forth until another major deployment in early 2022. While the world continued to speculate on the reasons for this ‘unusual’ troop deployment around Ukraine, Russian diplomats and officials assured the media and western nations that Russia had no intention to attack Ukraine.⁸ Speculation however became a reality on 24 February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine, launching attacks on border towns and advancing towards Kyiv, the

³ “Moscow takes measures in response to ‘threatening’ NATO actions,” *The Moscow Times*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/13/moscow-takes-measures-in-response-to-threatening-nato-actions-a73581>

⁴ Since the end of the cold war, NATO allies have conducted military exercises in Europe with Russia often objecting to these exercises. The largest military exercise conducted so far was in 2018 called *Trident Juncture 18*. The operation involved over 50,000 personnel drawn from 31 NATO and partner countries. See “Trident Juncture 18,” https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_158620.htm ; Richard D. Sokolsky, *The new NATO-Russia military balance: implications for European Security*. Vol. 13 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017).

⁵ Todd Smith, “Massive, Army-led NATO exercise Defender Europe kicks off,” *Army Times*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/03/15/massive-army-led-nato-exercise-defender-europe-kicks-off/>

⁶ “Defender-Europe 21 Fact Sheet,” *US Army Europe and Africa*, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/DefenderEurope/>

⁷ Matthew Funaile and Joseph Bermudez, “Unpacking the Russian Troop build-up along Ukraine’s border,” *CSIS High Resolution Spotlight*, 22 April 2021.

⁸ “Russia downplays threat to Ukraine in talks with US,” *BBC*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-59945170>

Ukrainian capital. In a speech given by President Putin while announcing the invasion of Ukraine - which was depicted as a *special military operation* - he stated, "It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border."⁹

Immediately after the invasion of Ukraine, several countries around the world condemned the attack on a sovereign country. Leading the condemnation was the President of the United States, Joe Biden who described the attack as an "unprovoked and unjustified attack."¹⁰ The president concluded that the US and its allies would respond in a united and decisive way. Other permanent members of the United Nations security council such as Great Britain and France also condemned the attacks in the strongest possible terms. The only permanent member of the security council which did not directly condemn the attack was China. Not only did China refuse to call the attack an invasion, but it also put the blame on the United States. According to the spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry, "The U.S. has been fuelling the flame, fanning up the flame, how do they want to put out the fire?"¹¹ The comments made by the Chinese official reflect the view of the country of the United States and NATO. Almost three weeks before the invasion, Russia and China had indicated their intention to challenge the global order which had the United States at the helm. Both countries after a bilateral meeting on the eve of the Beijing Winter Olympics issued a communique establishing a friendship between the two states with *no limits*. The

⁹ President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 24 February 2022 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

¹⁰ Jeremy Herb, Donald Judd and Phil Mattingly, "Biden condemns 'Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine," CNN, 24 February 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/23/politics/biden-russia-ukraine/index.html>

¹¹ Evelyn Cheng, "China refuses to call Russian attack on Ukraine an 'invasion,' deflects blame to US," CNBC, 24 February 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/24/china-refuses-to-call-attack-on-ukraine-an-invasion-blames-us.html>

communiqué also stated that “there are no forbidden areas of co-operation.”¹² Another notable country to refuse to denounce the invasion was India. Unlike China, which sees Russia as a significant ally as both countries have a *common enemy* in the United States and the West, India believes maintaining a strong relationship with Russia is important in countering Chinese hegemony in the region. James Chiriyankandath has argued that India’s position not to condemn Russia, instead remaining neutral, should be understood from the perspectives of realpolitik (defence and economic interests) as well as geopolitics.¹³

Apart from the stance of the several influential Asian states, one of the biggest surprises for the West has been the reaction and stance of several notable African countries. Having enjoyed political patronage and goodwill from most countries in Africa for several decades, the United States and its Western allies expected a robust and strong castigation of Russia by their allies from the continent but were shocked by the response of some key African countries. While many such countries were quick to condemn the invasion and toed the line of the US and other Western allies, some notable countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Senegal refused to condemn the attack with some blaming the West and NATO for the war. For instance, President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa argued that while his country has been pressured to take a “very adversarial stance against Russia,” they would not take that approach but rather insist on dialogue as the only way to end the conflict. While fielding questions on the topic in a parliamentary debate, Ramaphosa stated that “The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region.”¹⁴ Another notable country in Africa to assume a neutral position is Senegal. This is particularly important because the president of Senegal is the current chairman of the African Union and the stance of President Macky Sall can be interpreted as the

¹² “Russia and China unveil a pact against America and the West,” *The New Yorker*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/russia-and-china-unveil-a-pact-against-america-and-the-west>

¹³ James Chiriyankandath, “Understanding India’s approach to the Russia-Ukraine war: realpolitik,” *Institute of Commonwealth Studies*, 28 June 2022, <https://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/blog/understanding-indias-approach-russia-ukraine-war-realpolitik>

¹⁴ Tim Cocks, “South Africa’s Ramaphosa blames NATO for Russia’s war in Ukraine,” *Reuters*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-russias-war-ukraine-2022-03-17/>

collective view from Africa especially after he visited Moscow in June in his capacity as the head of the 54-nation union.¹⁵

The unexpected stance of neutrality held by many influential African countries coupled with notable abstentions in several UN resolutions have rattled their Western allies and raised several questions. Could this be a sign that Africa is reviving its historical position of non-alignment? Are perceptions of Western neo-imperialism in Africa behind this stance? Does this permanently damage the now long-established cordial relationship between the West and much of Africa? This article explains why African countries are taking their current stance and the implications this might have on the international balance of power at the end of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. The reasons are linked to political, economic, and strategic considerations as well as contemporary grievances relating to the recent Covid pandemic and the treatment of Africans in Ukraine at the onset of the war.

What is the Stance of Africa on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?

The stance of individual countries in Africa on the war between Russia and Ukraine can be evidenced in two key ways. The first is voting patterns on several Security Council and UN General Assembly resolutions proposed since the start of the war. Since the start of the war, the United Nations has played a significant role in trying to end the conflict either through putting up motions to condemn the actions of Russia or using its mechanisms to demand a cessation of hostilities. The second way which sometimes explains voting patterns is direct statements issued by representatives of African countries. Either through interviews granted by African leaders and their representatives or through parliamentary debates, most African nations have directly or indirectly indicated their stance on the conflict.

The first indication of the position of African countries came through voting on the first draft UN resolution on ending the conflict issued the day after the invasion

¹⁵ Zaini Majeed, "Putin meets African Union chairman and Senegal Prez Macky Sall in Russia amid Ukraine war," *Republicworld.com*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/putin-meets-african-union-chairman-and-senegal-prez-macky-sall-in-russia-amid-ukraine-war-articleshow.html>

began. The draft security council resolution- SC/14808, which was submitted by Albania and the United States and intended to end Russia’s offensive against Ukraine, was supported by 11 members of the security council, vetoed by Russia, while China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained. The three current non-permanent members of the Security Council from Africa - Gabon, Ghana, and Kenya - all voted in support of the draft resolution.¹⁶ The representative from Kenya (Martin Kimani) - while voting in support of the resolution - stated that his “heart was heavy” for the people of Ukraine as he likened the invasion to the “hasty, ill-considered intervention in Libya” about ten years ago which he argued did not lead to peace and safety but rather has “unleashed terror” including in countries south of Libya.¹⁷ Although he voted in support of the motion, the comparison to the intervention in Libya which was launched by NATO can be interpreted as criticism of the West.

There have been several other Security Council and General Assembly resolutions proposed since the war started:

Table 1: UN Voting on Proposed Resolutions on Ukraine War

Un Resolution	Africa Support	Africa Neutral	Africa Against
SC/14808 25 FEBRUARY 2022	All three non-permanent members: Ghana, Kenya, and Gabon	N/A	N/A
SC/14809 27 FEBRUARY 2022	All three non-permanent members: Ghana, Kenya, and Gabon	N/A	N/A
SC/14838 23 MARCH 2022 RESOLUTION SPONSORED BY RUSSIA	N/A	All three non-permanent members: Ghana, Kenya and Gabon	N/A

¹⁶ United Nations, “Security Council fails to adopt draft Resolution on ending Ukraine crises” 25 February 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm>

¹⁷ Ibid.

GA/12407 2 MARCH 2022	All other African countries	Algeria, Angola, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	Eritrea
GA/12411 24 MARCH 2022	All other African countries	Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	Eritrea
GA/12414 7 APRIL 2022	All other African countries	Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Tanzania,	Algeria, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mali, Zimbabwe

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL 4 MARCH 2022	Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Somalia,	Cameroon, Namibia, Senegal, Sudan	Eritrea
UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL 12 MAY 2022	Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Somalia,	Cameroon, Namibia, Senegal, Sudan	Eritrea

Table 1: Showing how African countries have voted in UN-sponsored votes since the start of the war. Compiled from UN websites.¹⁸

¹⁸ Table drawn from UN websites: United Nations, "Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution on ending Ukraine crises, as Russian Federation wields veto," SC/14808, 25 February 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm>;

United Nations, "Security council calls emergency special session of General Assembly on Ukraine crises," SC/14809, 27 February 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14809.doc.htm>

United Nations, "Security Council fails to adopt text demanding civilian protection, unhindered humanitarian access in Ukraine, as 13 members abstain," SC/14838, 23 March 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14838.doc.htm>

United Nations, "General Assembly overwhelmingly adopts resolution demanding Russian federation immediately end illegal use of force in Ukraine, withdraw all troops," GA/12407, 2 March 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>

United Nations, "General Assembly adopts text recognising scale of humanitarian woes arising from Russian Federation's Ukraine offensive as unseen in many decades," GA/12411, 24 March 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12411.doc.htm>

United Nations, "General Assembly adopts text to suspend Russian Federation from Human Rights Council, continuing emergency special session on humanitarian crises in Ukraine," GA/12414, 7 April 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12414.doc.htm>

United Nations, "Human Rights Council establishes independent international commission on inquiry to investigate all alleged violations of human rights in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine," *Human Rights Council*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/human-rights-council-establishes-independent-international-commission>

United Nations, "Human Rights Council adopts resolution on the deteriorating Human Rights situation in Ukraine and closes special session," *Human Rights Council*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/human-rights-council-adopts-resolution-deteriorating-human-rights-situation>

Table 1 shows how African countries voted in several UNSC votes, General Assembly votes as well as at the UN Human rights council. The three current non-permanent members of the security council - Ghana, Kenya, and Gabon - all voted in support of security council resolutions SC/14808 and SC/14809. While the first resolution was intended to end the Russian military offensive against its neighbouring state, the second was to hold an emergency session of the UN General Assembly. All three countries later abstained from voting on SC/14838 which was a Russian resolution demanding protection for and assistance to the civilian population on Ukrainian territory.¹⁹

While there were unanimous decisions taken by African representatives on the security council, the picture is quite different in the General Assembly. On 2 March 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution (GA/14207) demanding Russia immediately end the use of force in Ukraine and withdraw all its forces from the country. The motion saw 141 states vote in favour, five against, and 35 abstentions. There was less unanimity on the African continent at the General Assembly than on the Security Council. Twenty-eight out of 54 African states supported the motion, 17 abstained, Eritrea voted against the motion and the remaining eight countries were absent. This pattern was repeated on 24 March on a resolution (GA/12411) drafted by Ukraine imploring the assembly to recognise that Russia's military offensive and its humanitarian consequences are on a scale that the international community has not seen in Europe in decades. Eritrea again voted against the motion while 19 African countries abstained from voting. Interestingly, South Africa also drafted a resolution (which was not passed) on the same day which was similar to the Ukrainian draft but without referring to Russia.²⁰

¹⁹ Draft Resolution SC/14808- Draft resolution intended to end the Russian Federation's military offensive against that neighbouring State.

Draft Resolution SC/14809- Draft resolution on whether to use armed force, when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.

Draft Resolution SC/14838- Draft Resolution draft resolution demanding civilian protection in Ukraine and unhindered access for humanitarian assistance. The draft resolution was sponsored by Russia but was denounced as an attempt by Russia to justify attack on Ukraine.

²⁰ Peter Fabricius, "South Africa: Pretoria's Resolution on providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine is defeated in UN General Assembly," *All Africa*, 24 March 2022,

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202203250047.html>

Perhaps, the most interesting resolution was one of April 7 initiated by the United States for the General Assembly to suspend Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council. While the resolution (GA/12414) passed with 93 in support and 24 against, 58 abstentions were recorded while 18 member states were absent. Unlike previous General Assembly votes where only Eritrea voted against, nine countries from Africa voted against the resolution with 22 abstaining from voting. Countries such as Nigeria and Egypt which supported previous resolutions chose to abstain while the three non-permanent members of the security council either voted against (Gabon) or abstained (Ghana and Kenya). The voting patterns are similar to the resolutions conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council on 4 March and 12 May where five out of the 13 African countries at the council abstained or voted against the resolutions passed.²¹

The pattern of voting exhibited by several African countries came as either a shock or disappointment to many of their Western allies and especially the stance of countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Senegal. While South Africa and Namibia have been seen as long-term allies of the United States and other Western countries, Senegal is one of the most established democracies on the continent and another key ally. With abstention or neutrality seen in some quarters as *muted support* for Russian action, the stance of these African countries has either been condemned or discounted by Western governments. South Africa has insisted that dialogue is the best way to end the conflict and has resisted calls to take a clear stance against Russia. The chief executive of the South African institute of international affairs Elizabeth Sidiropoulos argued that the South African position should be understood through two elements: its key foreign policy principles of non-alignment and the continued importance of solidarity with old friends.²² This stance has put South Africa at odds with many of its Western allies, particularly the United States. In July 2022, the US Secretary of State

²¹ United Nations, "Human Rights Council adopts resolution on the deteriorating Human Rights situation in Ukraine and closes special session" *Human Rights Council*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/human-rights-council-adopts-resolution-deteriorating-human-rights-situation>

²² Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "How do Global South politics of non-alignment and solidarity explain South Africa's position on Ukraine," *Brookings Institute*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/08/02/how-do-global-south-politics-of-non-alignment-and-solidarity-explain-south-africas-position-on-ukraine/>

Antony Blinken visited South Africa to seek the country's support over the war.²³ This was followed by a meeting at the White House between President Cyril Ramaphosa and President Joe Biden in September 2022. South Africa is seen as leading the other countries that have refused to condemn Russia and have stayed neutral over the Russia-Ukraine war, hence, the perceived US need to persuade or convince them otherwise.²⁴

Senegal is another country whose neutral stance has surprised its Western allies. The country has taken a neutral stance as indicated in UN General Assembly votes. This is particularly important because the current chairman of the African Union is Senegal's President Macky Sall, and there are questions as to whether Sall's stance can be seen to represent the stance of Africa as a whole. Senegal has had a long-term practice of staying neutral especially on issues outside of Africa. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Senegal was one of the countries that did not condemn Russia. Explaining the country's stance, one senior official stated "The natural role of our country in the world is to work for peace and the rapprochement of societies. That is why we abstain. It is a prudent posture but also a wise one. If you want to play the mediator between two conflicting parties, you can't condemn one over the other. In order to be credible, you have to be neutral."²⁵ Namibia on the other hand has a foreign policy guided by the slogan "a friend to all and enemy to none,"²⁶ which stresses the position that Namibia will seek friendly relations in pursuance of the country's best interest. Furthermore, Namibia's foreign-policy neutrality is embedded in the country's constitution (Article 96) with the principle of non-alignment.²⁷ When quizzed after the UNHRC vote, the Namibian Minister of International relations and cooperation, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, stated "Why not abstain? I am saying we are monitoring and evaluating the

²³ "Blinken in South Africa to seek support over Russia-Ukraine war," *Politico*, 8 July 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/07/blinken-south-africa-apartheid-russia-00050231>

²⁴ "Biden calls South Africa a vital voice despite Russia stance," *AP*, 17 September 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-biden-kamala-harris-africa-869b8b68c57404f4c0661f6757dde918>

²⁵ Mawunyo Boko, "Russia-Ukraine: A balancing act for Macky Sall, the voice of Senegal and the AU," *The African Report*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/184851/russia-ukraine-a-balancing-act-for-macky-sall-the-voice-of-senegal-and-the-au/>

²⁶ Dietrich Remmert, "The Harambee prosperity plan, Namibia's foreign policy directions and human security dimensions," in *Shaping the Human Security Landscape in Southern Africa: Namibia's foreign relations and cooperation with its neighbouring countries* (Windhoek :Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018), pp.16 – 37.

²⁷ Article 96 represent the foundation of Namibia's policy on foreign relations based on non-alignment: <https://www.lac.org/na/laws/annoSTAT/Namibian%20Constitution.pdf>

situation, and I want to draw {your attention} to Article 96 of the Namibian Constitution. That is what is guiding us in handling issues such as this.”²⁸

The only country in Africa that has consistently voted with Russia at the General Assembly and Human Rights Council is Eritrea. Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a protracted war. The former leader of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) which fought for independence and current President of Eritrea, Issaias Afewerki, has never hidden his disdain for the West, especially America. Gaim Kibreab, in his book on Soviet-Eritrean relations published in 2021, stated “the EPLF always considered the Soviet Union as a strategic ally against imperialism and saw America as its number one enemy”²⁹ In November 2021, the US sanctioned the Eritrean armed forces and governing party for gross human rights abuses.³⁰ Eritrea’s strong belief that neo-imperialism is rife in Africa coupled with the country’s lack of interest in western aid, seen as a “Trojan horse for Western interference” in the affairs of his country, explain the country’s voting pattern at the UN.³¹ Other African countries that have stayed neutral such as Angola, Mozambique, Algeria, and Congo have established long-term relationships with Russia from the soviet era with some having a strong commitment to non-alignment.³²

Although there hasn’t been a unified Pan-African stance on the war, some analysts have argued that maintaining a neutral stance can be interpreted as support for Russia. For instance, Aidan Hartley, writing for the Spectator, argued that “multitudes of Africans” are not only neutral but support Putin because he is an enemy of the West.

²⁸ “Namibia sits on fence,” *The Namibian*, 02 March 2022 <https://www.namibian.com.na/6218421/archive-read/Namibia-sits-on-fence>

²⁹ Gaim Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy: The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa, a Failed Intervention* (Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 2021).

³⁰ “Why is Eritrea backing Russian aggression in Ukraine?” *The Economist*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/08/why-is-eritrea-backing-russian-aggression-in-ukraine>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Several literatures on the relationship between USSR and African countries document the strong relationship. See Keith Somerville, “The USSR and Southern Africa Since 1976.”; Helen Desfosses, “The USSR and Africa.”; Roy Lyons, “The USSR, China and the horn of Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 5, no. 12 (1978): pp. 5-30; Alexander Hill highlighted how Russia has maintained strong ties with Angola even through hard times, “Russia is positioning itself as a global partner after the U.S. Afghanistan debacle,” *The Conversation.com*, 9 September 2021, <https://theconversation.com/russia-is-positioning-itself-as-a-global-partner-after-the-u-s-afghanistan-debacle-167030>

The author stated further that a key explanation for this is the imperialist nature of Britain, Europe, and America.³³ There was certainly considerable Western suspicion when President Macky Sall along with the African Union Commission Chair, Moussa Faki Mahamat, visited Moscow on 3 June 2022 at a time when Russia appeared to be increasingly isolated. While not presenting a united African union position, the visit of the two top chiefs of the AU suggested that much of Africa was not in any mood to abandon Russia. But if not, why not?

Neo Imperialism in Africa

The above-mentioned comments of President Afewerki of Eritrea regarding Western neo-imperialism in Africa partly explain the stance of some African countries in relation to the West. Does neo-imperialism explain the neutral stance of many countries in Africa concerning the Russia-Ukraine conflict?

Much literature on neo-imperialism explores the causes and impact of neo-imperialism in Africa. Most studies carried out in this area highlight the underdevelopment of Africa and its weak status in the international economy and vulnerability to Western influence and domination.³⁴ While it is easy to argue that there is African agency involved in imperialism, the fact remains that an unequal relationship exists between the West and African countries whereby the West still dictates terms. This is evident in the attempts at *arm twisting* by Western nations for Africa to follow the *world majority* in condemning Russia.

Neo-imperialism exists in the monopolisation (and sometimes manipulation) of the economy of a developing country by other developed countries. This is often achieved through diplomatic means which often have negative effects on the host

³³ Aidan Hartley, "Why so many African leaders support Putin," *The Spectator*, 16 April 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-so-many-african-leaders-support-putin/>

³⁴ Samuel Bassey and David Udoudom, "Developmental Democracy in Africa: A Review," *OmniScience: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal* 8, 2 (2018): pp. 1-9; S. Okajare, "Sino- Western Rivalry as a New Trajectory of Neo-Imperialism Challenge for African Diplomacy and Development," *Social Transformations* 3, 1 (2015): pp. 27-42.

country.³⁵ Stephen defines imperialism as a policy put forth by a country with the aim of expanding its authority and dominating other nations using various forms of power.³⁶ The author argues that imperialism is designed by one community to dominate another directly or indirectly. Imperialism as observed by Lenin is the highest form of capitalism.³⁷ In order to be part of the capitalist world, third-world countries have been encouraged to engage in trading raw materials rather than using their natural resources for internal development. Internal corruption in the subjugated country is one of the main hallmarks of neo-imperialism. Corruption makes a country easily malleable for developed nations when practiced by its leaders and citizens. For instance, Nigeria has the capacity to build enough refineries to meet its need for petroleum products, but its leaders prefer exporting crude oil to other nations and purchasing expensive refined fuels overseas.³⁸ Some critics have however considered the theory of neo-imperialism to be an attempt to blame colonialism for some of Africa's problems like corruption rather than finding durable solutions.³⁹

In Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de La Terre*, the author analysed the causes of neo-colonialism in Africa. Fanon reveals that the western exploitative tendencies all relate to their capitalist nature, with Africa reduced to being a mere source of natural resources for the development of the West.⁴⁰ An example of this is French exploitation of Uranium in Niger. AREVA, a mining company, 80 percent owned by France, has been mining Uranium in Niger since 1968 with its activities exposing thousands of locals to high levels of radiation resulting in rising number of deaths.⁴¹ Niger ranks 187 out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index and has an annual budget smaller than AREVA, with the company contributing little or nothing to developing Niger's

³⁵ Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, Md. Rawshan Yeazdani and Rashed Mahmud, "The Untold History of Neocolonialism in Africa (1960-2011)," *History Research* 5, 1 (2017): pp. 9-16.

³⁶ Matthew D. Stephen, "Imperialism," *The Encyclopedia of Global Studies* (2012): pp. 884-886.

³⁷ Lenin, Vladimir, "Imperialism, the highest stage of Capitalism: A popular outline," *Lenin's selected works* (Progress Publishers, 1963), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, "Neocolonialism," *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* 4 (2005): pp. 1623-1625.

⁴⁰ Falola and Matthew, "Neocolonialism," p. 1624.

⁴¹ Nick Meynen, "France's dirty little secret in Niger," *META*, 18 October 2017, <https://meta.eeb.org/2017/10/18/french-state-owned-company-creates-ecocide-in-niger-to-fuel-its-nuclear-plants/>

economy. The chief economist of the World Bank and key advisor of US presidents', stated that "polluting Niger is cheaper than polluting France"⁴² - a statement that sums up France's imperialist action in Niger. Although many African nations seek their own economic growth through financial assistance from the West, the embezzlement of funds ostensibly allocated for such ends prevents meaningful growth.⁴³ Developed nations lend African countries money even when there is a belief that the money will be stolen or spent on bogus projects. This mechanism provides a way of entrenching the power relationship and keeping the latter subdued through debt. All these have led to the continued exploitation of Africans by developed nations.⁴⁴

Going back to the initial question in the last section, *Does neo-imperialism explain the neutral stance of many countries in Africa in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict?* it is important to explore the recent action of the US Congress in light of Stephen's definition noted above that imperialism is intended to allow one community to dominate another directly or indirectly. On 27 April 2022, the US House of representatives passed the *Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act*, which was designed to "punish African governments that abet Russian malign activities."⁴⁵ Defining "malign activities" as those which undermine United States objectives and interests, the bill was designed to "hold accountable the Russian Federation and African governments and their officials who are complicit in aiding such malign influence and activities."⁴⁶ This bill fits perfectly with Stephen's definition of imperialism given the intent of the United States to continue to dominate and exert authority over Africa using its power. The Act is seen as directly related to the neutral position of several African countries and expected to force them to *fall in line*. Reactions from the continent stem from the belief that this is part of a wider imperial agenda orchestrated by the United States. A senior official from the continent stated, "Why target Africa? They're obviously unhappy with the way so many African countries voted in the General

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tom Eneji Ogar and Joseph Nkang Ogar, "Globalization in Africa and Beyond: The Quest for Global Ethics," *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 1, 2 (2018): pp. 38-47.

⁴⁴ Arowolo, Dare. "The effects of western civilisation and culture on Africa," *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2010): pp. 1-13.

⁴⁵ Peter Fabricius, "A new law to punish states that back certain Russian actions could have major implications for African countries," *Institute for Security Studies*, 20 May 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/us-debates-bill-to-counter-malign-russian-activities-in-africa>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Assembly and their relatively non-aligned position.”⁴⁷ Fabricius believes that the US and their Western allies interpret neutrality or non-alignment to mean ‘aligning with Russia’, which must be punished.⁴⁸ The Act also lays bare some of the fears of many Africans that the continent is not expected to have a voice as it is only a source of raw material to develop the West. This lends credence to the statement made by Vice Admiral Robert Moeller, the head of AFRICOM⁴⁹ in 2008 that “the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market was one of Africom's guiding principles” while stating that terrorism and the growing influence of China are the major challenges to US’s interests.⁵⁰

Contrary to expectations by the US that the *Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act* would force African countries to change their stance and fall in line, the Act seems to be having the opposite effect. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) during its summit of Heads of state and government in August 2022 “vehemently expressed their collective opposition” to the Act and maintained a united front in relation to their stance. They stated that “Africa is not for sale. Africa is open for business not for sale or looting” and reaffirmed their collective position of neutrality towards conflicts outside of Africa.⁵¹ This declaration may in the future result in a situation whereby other members of the 16 nation-states which previously aligned with the West might take a neutral stance in future votes to show a collective front. The fallout from the war could further weaken the already fragile relationship between Western nations and African countries.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Peter Fabricius, “Analysis: Proposed U.S law seeks to punish African countries for ‘aligning’ with Russia,” 20 May 2022, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/531252-analysis-proposed-u-s-law-seeks-to-punish-african-countries-for-aligning-with-russia.html>

⁴⁹ AFRICOM- United States Africa Command is one of the combatant commands of the United States Department of Defence created to counter transnational threats in order to advance U.S. national interests

⁵⁰ Daniel Volman. “Africa: U.S Military holds war games on Nigeria, Somalia,” *All Africa*, 14 August 2009, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200908140153.html>

⁵¹ “The 16 members of the South African Development Community (SADC) owe their allegiance to Russia,” *Addis Herald*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.addisherald.com/the-16-members-of-the-south-african-development-community-sadc-owe-their-allegiance-to-russia/>

Why did African Countries choose to be *Neutral*?

Also important in understanding African neutrality are past relationships between African nations and Russia and the Soviet Union. From the late 1950s at a time when African countries were gaining independence from colonial powers, the Soviet Union supported independence movements with assistance both for anti-colonial groups as well as newly independent states in Africa. The Soviet Union established the *Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee* which was funded by the Soviet Peace Fund to assist in the struggle for independence and several African organisations benefitted from this fund.⁵² By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union had signed hundreds of bilateral agreements with African countries and trained about 53,000 Africans in Soviet/Russian Universities and another 200,000 in Africa.⁵³

For decades, Russia has portrayed itself politically as a reliable alternative to the liberal, neo-colonial West. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union presented its Marxist-Leninist brand of socialism to Africa while criticising Western colonialism and imperialism.⁵⁴ This contributed to inflamed tensions between some African countries and former, Western, colonial powers. Aaliyah Vayez, while exploring Russia-Africa relations, explains that Russia's current road map for Africa is underscored by the principles of economism, pragmatism, and universalism. The author has stated that "Russia-Africa cooperation has been rooted in a number of shared values including decolonization, afro-optimism and afro-intellectualism" all of which centre on mutually beneficial and empowering relations.⁵⁵ The West's promotion of democracy and development assistance in Africa on the other hand (according to Russian officials) are in line with neo-colonialism and imperialism.⁵⁶ Some of these issues explain the current relationship between Russia and several African countries as well as their neutral stance on the war between Russia and Ukraine.

⁵² Alexandra A. Arkhangelskaya and Vladimir Shubin, "Russia's Africa policy," *South African Institute for International Affairs, Global Powers and Africa Programme*, Occasional Paper No 157 (2013).

⁵³ Vladimir Shubin, "Russia and Africa: moving in the right direction?" In *Africa in International Politics*, eds., Ian Taylor and Paul Williams (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 114-127.

⁵⁴ Hisham Aidi, "The Russia-Ukraine war: Implications for Africa" *Policy Centre for the New South, Policy Brief*, March 2022.

⁵⁵ Aaliyah Vayez, "A changing dynamic: The Evolution of Russia-Africa relations," *Republic.com*, 14 September 2020, <https://republic.com.ng/august-september-2020/a-changing-dynamic/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

For many African countries, neutrality is in itself a position on the war rather than an avoidance of taking one, and it is influenced in part by a desire for a multipolar world order. For decades anti-Western and anti-imperial ideas have motivated resistance in sub-Saharan Africa to the United States and European global dominance. However, the growing shift from a US-led unipolar world to a multipolar world that has China, Russia, and India forming some of those poles is further motivating some African leaders to reject the idea that they must choose between the East and the West or stick solely to their traditional Western allies. From the perspective of the developing world, with increased multipolarity come more choices, leading to more flexible and unpredictable alignments. This trend is visible in Africa's diverse political, economic, security, social, and ideological partnerships with their U.S., European, Chinese and Russian counterparts.

Multipolarity is visible in sub-Saharan African countries' diverse and sometimes conflicting global partnerships on issues like economic development, territorial sovereignty, and political stability. Undoubtedly, leaders across Africa are considering how the myriad of possible outcomes for the war in Ukraine will impact their international partnerships and ability to maintain governance. The continuation of arms deals, loans, infrastructure agreements, foreign aid, trade agreements, treaties, and tariffs with their partners regardless of the stance of these partners on the Russia-Ukraine war is of paramount importance to African leaders. So, the neutral stance is taken by these leaders to ensure that these are not adversely impacted. However, in addition to the anti-imperialist argument, there are several other issues that explain the stance taken by several African countries on the war. These will be explored in the next section.

The Role of NATO in the Conflict

Several African nations, and in particular South Africa, see NATO as the aggressor in the war in Ukraine. As explained earlier in the introduction, the role played by NATO in carrying out drills closer to the Russian border coupled with the eastward expansion of the organisation has been a source of concern for Russia with many countries in Africa, seeing NATO as adopting an aggressive stance towards Russia. The former president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences and army

general Makhmut Akhmetovich Gareyev stated that NATO is a product of the Cold War and was “[i]ntended to oppose the USSR.”⁵⁷ He argued in 1997 that the expansion of NATO will aggravate the imbalance that has endured between Russia and the West. NATO had previously given Russia assurances through the 1990 multilateral *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe* (CFE Treaty) to “establish a military balance at lower levels and eliminate collective capabilities for regional surprise attacks or large-scale aggression.”⁵⁸ The US secretary of state, James Baker, in 1990, and German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher stated in 1990 that NATO did not intend to expand further eastward after German unification.⁵⁹

After Russia invaded Ukraine several countries believed that NATO’s expansion left Putin with little choice but to carry out the invasion. This perception was echoed by the President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa who was one of the few world leaders to directly blame NATO for the war. According to Ramaphosa, “The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region.”⁶⁰ African countries have been skeptical of the activities of NATO since the organisation’s invasion of Libya which resulted in the killing of Ghadaffi and destabilisation of the region after 2012.⁶¹ The former President of Namibia Sam Nujoma believed the invasion of Libya, orchestrated by NATO, represented a renewed resolve by the West to control Africa’s natural resources stating that African countries should be ready to take up arms to defend the continent against a “resurgent Western

⁵⁷ Makhmut A. Gareev, “The expansion of NATO does not solve, but aggravates security issues,” *Die Friedens-Warte* 72, 3 (1997): pp. 297-303.

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Richter, “NATO-Russia tensions: Putin orders invasion of Ukraine,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* (2022), p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ “S Africa’s Ramaphosa: NATO to blame for Russia’s war in Ukraine,” *Aljazeera*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/18/update-1-s-africas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-for-russias-war-in-ukraine>

⁶¹ Crăişor-Constantin Ioniță, “The Libyan conflict and its destabilising impact on North Africa,” *Strategic Impact* 75, no. 2 (2020): pp. 182-196.

imperialist forces.”⁶² He argued that NATO’s action constitutes a “naked aggression on the part of the imperialists and this must be condemned and rejected.”⁶³

Military Alliance with Russia

Moscow is a major supplier of weapons to Africa and many countries depend on these weapons to fight insurgency and protect their borders. An analysis of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) arms transfer database shows that since the year 2000, Russia has directly supplied 29 countries in Africa with various weapons. Of these countries, Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Morocco, Nigeria, and Uganda are the most significant recipients of Russian arms on the continent. The database shows that Russia has supplied 128,421 pieces of military hardware to these countries in the last 21 years (2000-2021).⁶⁴ Since Russia does not insist on adherence to human rights as a condition for arms supply, many African countries are shifting their suppliers from their Western allies to other countries such as Russia, Turkey, China, and Pakistan. For instance, the United States suspended the sale of certain weapons to Nigeria in 2014 due to gross human rights abuses committed by the Nigerian military.⁶⁵ Further analysis of the SIPRI database shows that while Nigeria did not purchase any military hardware from Russia between 2004 and 2014, Russia has supplied weapons to Nigeria every year since 2014 with the only exception being in 2016. In 2021, Russia signed military cooperation agreements with Nigeria and Ethiopia - which are the two most populous countries in Africa.⁶⁶

Furthermore, the Wagner group, which is one of the largest private military contractors in Africa owned by Russia, has a significant footprint in Africa and is involved in several ongoing counterterrorism operations on the continent. The Wagner

⁶² “Get ready for war,” *Global Civilians for peace in Libya*, 5 March 2012, <https://globalciviliansforpeace.wordpress.com/2012/03/05/get-ready-for-war/>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Arms Transfer Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/>

⁶⁵ “Boko Haram Crises: Nigeria fury over US arms refusal,” *BBC*, 11 November 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-30006066>

⁶⁶ “Russia is building its military influence in Africa, challenging U.S. and French dominance,” *CNBC*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/13/russia-is-building-military-influence-in-africa-challenging-us-france.html>

Group operates in Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Madagascar, the Central African Republic, and several other African countries.⁶⁷ It is important to state that many of the countries that have abstained from the UN resolutions either purchase arms from Russia or are connected to the Wagner group in some form.

Economic Ties with African Nations

Growing economic ties between Russia and several African countries are also likely a factor in the decision-making of some African countries over their stance towards the war in Ukraine. Analysis of trade and economic interdependences shows that Russia and many African countries are bound by many bilateral agreements with some inherited from the Soviet Union. Russia has trade agreements and bilateral relations with 37 African states on technical and economic assistance, and with forty-two countries on trade.⁶⁸ In 2019, Russia organised the first Russia-Africa economic forum in Sochi with the motto being “For Peace, Security and Development.”⁶⁹ The summit showed a renewed interest in Africa to cooperate with Russia with all 54 countries officially represented, out of which 45 were represented by their heads of states. What is particularly striking is the position held by Russia to give support to African countries without interfering in local politics, a stance similar to that of China that has helped to entrench China in Africa.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ “Private military contractors bolster Russian influence in Africa,” *France 24*, 04 February 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220204-private-military-contractors-bolster-russian-influence-in-africa>

⁶⁸ Tatiana Deich, “Africa in the Foreign Policy Priorities of Russia. Moscow: Institute for African Studies,” in, *Rossisko-afrikanskije otnosheniya i obraz Rossii v Afrike* [Russian–African Relations and Russia’s Image in Africa], edited by T. Deich & E. Korendyasov (Moscow: Institut Afriki RAN, 2007), p. 40.

⁶⁹ “Outcomes of the first Russia–Africa Summit and Economic Forum. Roscongress to continue working on the African track until the next Forum,” *Summit Africa*, 24 October 2019, <https://summitafrica.ru/en/news/podvedeny-itogi-pervogo-sammita-i-ekonomicheskogo-foruma-rossija-afrika-roskongress-prodolzhit-rabotu-na-afrikanskom-treke-v-period-do-sledujushchego-foruma/>

⁷⁰ The promise of *no strings attached* should be understood in context. What both countries offer is non-interference in internal political dynamics and not necessarily a relationship without seeking something in return. See Madison Condon. “China in Africa: What the policy of non-intervention adds to the Western development dilemma,” *Praxis: The Fletcher Journal of Human Security* 27, 2012.

Apart from the promises of further economic cooperation and the 92 agreements and memoranda of understanding signed at the Sochi summit,⁷¹ several African countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for wheat and fertilizer. With a quarter of all African countries depending on Russia and Ukraine for around a third of their wheat consumption a cautious approach to relations with these countries seems like the best option to guarantee supply. Russia's recent donation of grain to some African countries can perhaps be seen as highlighting the desirability of a neutral stance towards the war in Ukraine for facilitating food supply.⁷²

Perceived Neglect by the West

Another important issue that contributes to understanding the neutral stance of some African countries is the impact and consequences of Covid-19 and the perceived increasing neglect by the West. At the start of the pandemic, there were several statements of collectiveness and solidarity preached especially by multinational organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations (UN). Despite the plea by these organisations that rich countries should support poor countries, most countries simply focused on the needs of their citizens ignoring pleas for support from outside of their countries. The perceived lack of support from the West during the pandemic further pushed African countries away from their traditional western allies. In 2021, during the pandemic, the United States was "sitting on tens of millions of vaccines" while conducting clinical trials, at a time when countries where the vaccines had been approved for use "begged for access."⁷³ At the same time, the UK disposed of over 600,000 expired vaccines when just two percent of people were fully vaccinated in lower-income countries and ten percent in lower-middle-income

⁷¹ "Outcomes of the first Russia–Africa Summit and Economic Forum. Roscongress to continue working on the African track until the next Forum," *SummitAfrica.rue*.

⁷² "Erdogan, Putin agreed to send Russian grains to poor African countries for free," *Reuters*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/erdogan-says-agreed-with-putin-grains-should-go-poor-african-countries-free-2022-11-04/>

⁷³ Noah Weiland and Rebecca Robbins, "The U.S. Is Sitting on Tens of Millions of Vaccine Doses the World Needs," 11 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/us/politics/coronavirus-astrazeneca-united-states.html>

countries.⁷⁴ Several African countries had to look beyond their Western allies to vaccinate their citizens with China alone donating 600 million doses of vaccines to Africa.⁷⁵

The immediate consequences of the war in Ukraine further exposed deep-rooted racism where the treatment of African students and other black people in Ukraine at the start of the conflict drew considerable criticism. About 16,000 African students trying to flee the war were denied admission to trains and were not given food while Ukrainians traveling with them were treated differently. One of the students stranded in Ukraine while trying to flee to Poland stated “They stopped us at the border and told us that Blacks were not allowed. But we could see White people going through.”⁷⁶ Several countries in Africa condemned the treatment of Africans with the African Union and African Union commission issuing a statement stating that “Reports that Africans are singled out for unacceptable dissimilar treatment would be shockingly racist and in breach of international law.”⁷⁷ Videos of the mistreatment of Africans which were shared on YouTube further confirmed the fear that Western nations still see Africans as unequal, further serving as a reason to take a neutral stance on the conflict.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ “Report: UK disposed of 600,000 AZ vaccine doses after they passed expiry date,” *Pharmatimes*, 16 November 2021,

https://www.pharmatimes.com/news/report_uk_disposed_of_600,000_az_vaccine_doses_after_they_passed_expiry_date_1383593

⁷⁵ Edward Mcallister and Tom Daly, “China's Xi pledges another 1 bln COVID-19 vaccine doses for Africa,” *Reuters*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chinas-xi-pledges-10-blncredit-line-african-financial-institutions-2021-11-29/>

⁷⁶ Mehdi Chebil, “Pushed back because we’re black: Africans stranded at Ukraine-Poland border,” *France24*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220228-pushed-back-because-we-re-black-africans-stranded-at-ukraine-poland-border>

⁷⁷ “Statement of the African Union on the reported ill treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine”, 2 February 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220228/statement-ill-treatment-africans-trying-leave-ukraine>

⁷⁸ See Vivienne Dovi, “The treatment Africans are facing in Ukraine is despicable, but why are we surprised,” *Euronews*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/01/the-treatment-africans-are-facing-in-ukraine-is-despicable-but-why-are-we-surprised>

Another Proxy war in Europe of which Africa should be weary?

Finally, and relating to some of the above factors, several African countries see the conflict in Ukraine as yet another proxy war between the West and Russia and do not want to get entangled in the geopolitics surrounding such a war. For many African leaders events in Ukraine and Western support for it against Russia are reminiscent of the Cold War, which still has negative consequences in some African countries to date.⁷⁹ Some weeks after the war started, the Biden administration stated that America's goal in the conflict is to weaken Russia and ensure it can no longer threaten its neighbours. The US defence secretary at a news conference in Poland stated, "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."⁸⁰ Despite many Western countries denying this is a proxy war with most Western media avoiding the phrase, the director of the CIA under President Obama stated, "It's a proxy war with Russia whether we say so or not."⁸¹ Alex Callinicos referred to the war as an "imperialist proxy war."⁸² Such statements coupled with the large-scale military support given to Ukraine by NATO certainly suggest a proxy war and African nations do not want to get enmeshed in the messy politicking of world superpowers by taking stances that might negatively impact their development or economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Also, Western sanctions against Russia are driving food crises and price surges across Africa, which make leaders more vulnerable to internal threats of political and social instability. Maintaining a neutral diplomatic stance on the war in Ukraine does not alleviate these challenges; however, it grants African leaders flexibility as they attempt to leverage the situation in their negotiations with the United States, China, and other international partners.

⁷⁹ Olayinka Ajala, "Russia's war with Ukraine: Five reasons why many African countries choose to be 'neutral'," *The Conversation*, 30 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/russias-war-with-ukraine-five-reasons-why-many-african-countries-choose-to-be-neutral-180135>

⁸⁰ Carole Landry, "US wants Russia weekend," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/briefing/russia-ukraine-war-us.html>

⁸¹ Alex Callinicos, "The conflict in Ukraine is an imperialist proxy war," *socialistworker*, 2 May 2022, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/alex-callinicos/the-conflict-in-ukraine-is-an-imperialist-proxy-war/>

⁸² Ibid.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine is impacting most countries in the world. Economically, prices of goods and services are rising and many countries around the world are experiencing energy crises that can be linked to the war in Ukraine. Politically, fractures are appearing in long-established political structures with many countries around the world deciding on how to respond to the war in Ukraine based on their political, economic, and strategic interests. Surprisingly, Africa is generating a lot of attention due to the stance of several notable countries – including some seen as key allies of Western countries. Contrary to expectations that most African countries except those ruled by despots would follow the West in condemning and putting pressure on Putin to end the war, many African countries chose to stay neutral without condemning Russia or supporting resolutions to put pressure on Putin to end the war. This article has explored not only the role of neo-imperialism in shifting political alliances away from the West as well as a key factor fostering neutrality, but also other factors. It has made use of UN resolution voting patterns as well as statements made by African leaders as lenses through which the stances of African leaders can be understood.

While it is difficult to predict at this stage whether the stances taken by a number of African countries will permanently damage the long and established cordial relationship between the West and these nations, it is imperative for key Western countries such as the US not to up the ante, especially through acts of congress which could see non-aligned countries punished through sanctions. Rather than force African countries to *fall in line*, Western countries should engage in dialogue to calm tensions and seek to understand their stance not as a line of support for Russia but as a reaction/decision emerging out of legitimate political, economic and strategic interests. Otherwise, there is a risk of pushing these countries further away from the West and further damaging long-established and typically cordial relationships.