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THE NEW SOUTH AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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The Russia–Ukraine war, while primarily perceived as a European security crisis, has triggered deep structural shocks globally, disproportionately affecting the developing world—the "New South." This essay explores how historical legacies, global economic dependencies, and shifting geoeconomic paradigms have converged through the war to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. It critically examines the war's impact through four interconnected lenses: a worsening global food crisis, the decline of European economic capacity, shrinking development aid, and a loss of Western moral legitimacy. Grounded in historical continuity and geoeconomic theory, the essay argues that the war's profound global repercussions necessitate the New South's pursuit of strategic autonomy through fostering regional integration, economic diversification, local market resilience, and advocacy for reforms in global governance structures.

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INTRODUCTION: REFRAMING THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR AS A GLOBAL CRISIS

When Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, global discourses largely framed the conflict as a European security crisis, centered on transatlantic alliances. In the corridors of Brussels, Washington, and London, it was cast as a defense of liberal order and sovereignty on European soil. Yet, history warns against such parochial interpretations. European wars have rarely remained confined to their continent. Time and again, their geopolitical tremors have reverberated across the globe, often with devastating consequences for regions far removed from the immediate theatres of battle.

The First World War, sparked by an assassination in Sarajevo, ultimately drew in colonial troops from Africa and Asia, devastated economies on both sides of the equator, and dismantled empires from the Ottoman to the Austro-Hungarian. The Second World War, sparked in Europe, profoundly redrew the global order—ushering in decolonization, the Cold War, and the birth of the Bretton Woods institutions that continue to shape today's financial architecture. These wars were not simply European tragedies; they were global transformations.

The Russia–Ukraine war may lack the dramatic declarations of world war, but its effects are no less global. It marks a decisive rupture in the post-Cold War order—disrupting energy markets, inflating food prices, straining multilateral institutions, and prompting a recalibration of global alignments. Nowhere, however, are its ripple effects felt more acutely than in the developing world—what this essay defines as the "New South." This grouping of emerging economies from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia shares more than geographic diversity. It is bound by a common historical experience: centuries of colonial extraction, marginalization in global decision-making, and deep structural dependencies on a Western-led financial and trade system.

The war in Ukraine has acted as an accelerant to existing crises across the New South. Soaring wheat and fuel prices have pushed fragile economies to the brink of insolvency. Capital outflows, rising interest rates in advanced economies, and currency depreciation have reignited fears of a new debt crisis reminiscent of the 1980s. Meanwhile, as Western powers divert financial and diplomatic resources to counter Russia, concerns are growing that the urgent needs of the Global South—ranging from climate finance to post-pandemic recovery—are being deprioritized or outright neglected.

The conflict has not only exposed these vulnerabilities—it has forced a reckoning. Confronted with the instrumentalization of food, energy, and finance as tools of geopolitical coercion, countries across the New South are increasingly questioning the sustainability of a global order that leaves them so exposed. In response, they are forging new alignments, strengthening South–South cooperation, and advocating for a restructuring of the international financial architecture. Just as the aftermath of the Second World War spurred the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement and a wave of postcolonial agency, the fallout of the Russia–Ukraine war may be laying the groundwork for a reimagined geoeconomic future.

This essay argues that the war should not be seen as a localized geopolitical conflict but as a systemic shock with global ramifications—one that disproportionately impacts the New South, deepens longstanding inequities, and necessitates a strategic rethinking of international engagement, regional resilience, and the foundational assumptions of global order.

HISTORICAL DEPENDENCY AND CONTEMPORARY VULNERABILITIES

The economic position of what is now called the Global South has long been shaped by systems of extraction and subordination. From the 16th to the early 20th century, colonial powers integrated vast swathes of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East into a global economy not for mutual development, but to serve imperial industrial ambitions. Colonies functioned as repositories of raw materials—cotton, rubber, copper, sugar, oil—and as captive markets for metropolitan manufactures. This asymmetrical integration, often enforced by coercion and violence, entrenched a global division of labor that kept the periphery perpetually dependent on the core.

The formal end of colonial rule in the mid-20th century did not bring economic emancipation. Post-independence leaders across the Global South—ranging from Bourguiba in Tunisia and Nkrumah in Ghana to Nehru in India—pursued development strategies aimed at breaking the structural chains of dependency. Yet efforts at import substitution, industrialization, and regional integration were often hindered by insufficient capital, weak state institutions, and continued reliance on commodity exports. The terms of trade remained stacked against these nations, locking them into a cycle of boom and bust dictated by global commodity price swings.

The 1980s ushered in a new phase of dependency under the aegis of neoliberal globalization. Structural adjustment programs, promoted by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in response to the debt crisis, dismantled protective economic policies in exchange for access to emergency financing—the much decried Washington Consensus. As scholars such as Dani Rodrik and Joseph Stiglitz have emphasized, these reforms subordinated local development agendas to global market logics, mandating tariff reductions, capital liberalization, and the privatization of essential services. While globalization promised integration, what it delivered for much of the Global South was exposure without insulation: developing economies became fully tethered to global markets but lacked the buffers—fiscal space, diversified exports, financial autonomy—needed to withstand external shocks. Weak institutions, governance deficits, lack of transparency, and fragile rule of law further compounded the challenges faced by much of the New South.

When the Russia–Ukraine war erupted in 2022, these historical vulnerabilities were abruptly and brutally exposed. The war's disruption of global grain and fertilizer supplies—particularly from two of the world's largest exporters—triggered acute food insecurity across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, where many nations rely heavily on imports to feed their populations. Similarly, the spike in global energy prices following Western sanctions on Russia fueled inflationary spirals and widened fiscal deficits in fuel-importing developing countries.

Beyond food and fuel, the war also disturbed the global financial ecosystem in ways that disproportionately harmed the New South. As Western central banks hiked interest rates to curb inflation, capital rapidly fled emerging markets, depreciating currencies and inflating the cost of dollar-denominated debt. In a stark historical echo of the 1980s debt crisis, countries such as Sri Lanka, Ghana, and Pakistan found themselves teetering on the edge of default, once again forced into negotiations with international financial institutions under the familiar—and often punitive—conditions of austerity.

These are not merely temporary shocks but symptoms of deeper structural vulnerabilities embedded in the historical evolution of the global economic order. The Russia–Ukraine conflict did not create these fragilities; it exposed and accelerated them. It underscored how swiftly nations in the New South can be plunged into crisis by geopolitical developments over which they have no agency yet face immense consequences. The war thus serves as a stress test for a system that remains

fundamentally unbalanced—one where historical dependency continues to dictate contemporary vulnerability.

In this context, the Global South is increasingly recognizing the need to rethink the foundations of its global economic engagement. The growing interest in de-dollarization, regional financial arrangements—such as the BRICS' New Development Bank—food sovereignty initiatives, and South–South trade corridors reflects a strategic shift toward reducing exposure to the volatile geopolitics of the West. Much like earlier eras of postcolonial awakening, the present moment may catalyze a new wave of economic thought—one that pursues autonomy not through isolation, but through resilience, diversification, and the reassertion of national and regional agency.

FOOD SECURITY AS A HISTORICAL LEGACY AND A GEOECONOMIC CRISIS

Nowhere has the impact of the Russia–Ukraine war been more immediate, visceral, and widespread than in the global food markets. While the war's origins lie in European geopolitics, its most acute consequences have been felt thousands of miles away—in the bread queues of Cairo, the emptied silos of Amman, and the malnourished villages of the Sahel. This dislocation is not incidental. It reflects a long and painful history: the New South's food insecurity today is not merely the result of poor harvests or weak institutions but the enduring legacy of a global economic system designed from its inception to serve colonial priorities over local needs.

Historically, many territories now classified as part of the Global South were structurally integrated into the international economy not as sovereign producers of essential staples, but as suppliers of cash crops and raw commodities for European consumption and industrial expansion. Colonial economies were reoriented toward the cultivation of sugar, coffee, cotton, and rubber for export, while local food systems were neglected or deliberately dismantled. This shift undermined indigenous agricultural knowledge, distorted land use, and rendered colonies dependent on imported food staples—often from the very metropoles that controlled their trade routes. Famines in British India during the 19th and early 20th centuries, for instance, were exacerbated by policies that prioritized export crops and hoarded grain for imperial war efforts rather than local survival.

The post-independence era offered only limited reprieve. Many countries sought to reclaim food sovereignty through land reform and domestic agricultural investment, but debt burdens, structural adjustment programs, and global market pressures—compounded by weak governance, corruption, and the absence of strong legal frameworks—often curtailed these ambitions. The liberalization of food markets in the 1980s and 1990s, encouraged by international financial institutions, further eroded self-sufficiency. Many states were advised to dismantle food subsidies, reduce public agricultural spending, and rely on imports for basic staples under the premise that global markets would provide cheaper and more efficient access to food.

This assumption proved catastrophically flawed when the Russia–Ukraine war erupted. Together, Russia and Ukraine account for nearly one-third of global wheat exports, along with significant shares of global corn and sunflower oil trade. When war severed shipping lanes, destroyed port infrastructure, and triggered Western sanctions on Russian exports, global grain flows were disrupted almost overnight. The result was a sharp spike in international food prices—the highest since the 2008 food crisis—driven by uncertainty, panic buying, and commodity speculation. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023), the price surge pushed over 70 million people into acute food insecurity, disproportionately affecting countries least responsible for the war and least capable of absorbing the shock.

For Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, the crisis struck at the heart of its social contract. Bread—subsidized and heavily consumed by the poor—became a flashpoint, with price hikes threatening social unrest. In Lebanon, already reeling from currency collapse and political paralysis, the war-induced grain shortage compounded an already dire crisis, while in Sudan, rising food costs exacerbated humanitarian emergencies and inflamed existing ethnic and regional conflicts. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2023) warns that such food price volatility, layered atop fragile political institutions, can act as a "conflict multiplier," fueling displacement, protests, and, in some cases, state collapse.

Crucially, these outcomes are not inevitable—they are the result of policy choices shaped by historical dependencies. Overreliance on a narrow band of exporters for essential food supplies has left the New South dangerously exposed to external shocks, whether from war, climate, or economic policy shifts in the Global North. The Russia–Ukraine war has thus served as a painful wake-up call: food security is not just a humanitarian or developmental issue—it is a matter of national security and geoeconomic sovereignty.

In response, and drawing on authoritative advice from relevant organizations such as the FAO, countries across the New South have started to undertake a fundamental strategic reorientation. First, there is an urgent need to prioritize regional agricultural cooperation, moving beyond national silos toward shared resilience. This could include joint investments in grain reserves, cross-border storage infrastructure, and early warning systems for commodity price shocks. Institutions such as the African Union and ASEAN could play a catalytic role in fostering regional food security compacts, drawing on lessons from the Gulf Cooperation Council's strategic food reserves.

Second, governments must diversify their food import partners to reduce dependence on a handful of global suppliers. This may involve forging new trade agreements with South American and Asian producers or establishing food corridors that bypass conflict-prone regions. It also means leveraging the growing capacity of regional exporters within the New South itself, whose agricultural surpluses could help meet the needs of nearby food-deficit states, provided they receive adequate logistical and financial support.

Third, and most importantly, long-term resilience demands the revitalization of domestic agricultural sectors. This involves investing in agricultural technology, climate-resilient seed varieties, water-efficient irrigation systems, and support for smallholder farmers, who still account for a significant share of food production in developing economies. Governments must rebalance policy priorities to treat agriculture not as a relic of the past, but as a strategic sector for the future—one capable of reducing external dependence, supporting rural livelihoods, and buffering against geopolitical upheaval.

The Russia–Ukraine war has turned food into a weapon and hunger into a geopolitical fault line. For the New South, this moment must mark the beginning of a new era—one in which food sovereignty is reclaimed, historical injustices are corrected through deliberate policy choices, and resilience is rebuilt not in isolation, but through solidarity and structural reform.

THE SHRINKING EUROPEAN MARKET

The Russia–Ukraine war has not only redrawn geopolitical alliances—it has also hastened Europe's economic weakening, with cascading consequences for the developing world. As Europe grapples with energy insecurity, industrial disruption, and inflationary pressures triggered by the conflict, its role as a reliable export destination and investment partner for the New South is rapidly diminishing. The war did not create Europe's vulnerabilities, but it brutally exposed and accelerated them, forcing a structural contraction that is shrinking the continent's economic relevance for developing

economies long tied to European demand.

Historically, many New South economies—particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—were integrated into the global economy through colonial trade patterns that positioned Europe as the primary consumer of raw materials and exporter of manufactured goods. These asymmetries persisted after decolonization. In the post-World War II period, trade agreements such as the Lomé Conventions (1975–2000) and the Cotonou Agreement (2000–2021) institutionalized Europe's status as a central economic partner for its former colonies. By the early 2000s, the EU collectively accounted for over 30% of Sub-Saharan Africa's trade and was a key investor in sectors such as infrastructure, telecommunications, and extractives.

This model of engagement persisted into the 21st century, with many New South economies remaining heavily reliant on European consumer markets for commodity exports—oil from Nigeria and Angola, cocoa from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, flowers and vegetables from Morocco and Kenya, and processed goods from Vietnam and Bangladesh. Europe was not just a market—it was a financial partner, a source of aid, and a stabilizer of balance-of-payments constraints.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 upended this interdependence. The EU had long depended on Russia for over 40% of its natural gas and significant oil imports, with energy-intensive industries—especially in Germany and Central Europe—benefiting from stable and affordable supplies. The war, and the subsequent disruption of gas flows via Nord Stream, triggered a full-blown energy crisis. Electricity prices across the eurozone soared in late 2022, resulting in record inflation of 10.6% in October 2022, prompting European governments to subsidize energy bills while businesses slashed production or relocated.

This energy shock exposed the fragility of Europe's industrial base. German manufacturing output declined sharply, and companies began shifting operations to the U.S. and Asia, where energy was cheaper. Simultaneously, the war prompted a deeper strategic reassessment of Europe's external trade networks, including efforts to "de-risk" from China and secure strategic supply chains closer to home. These policy shifts, while framed as security necessities, have contracted Europe's external demand footprint—with direct consequences for the developing world.

The contraction of European demand, investment, and aid flows is now visibly affecting New South economies. The continent's declining industrial competitiveness has reduced its appetite for raw materials and energy imports from Africa and Latin America. For instance, EU imports of Nigerian crude oil dropped by over 35% between 2021 and 2023, while agricultural exporters like Tunisia and Ethiopia experienced significant declines in European orders, partly due to tightened consumer spending and evolving EU regulatory standards.

Simultaneously, as we will explore below, European foreign direct investment (FDI) into the New South has slowed. According to UNCTAD (2024), FDI flows from Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa declined by 18% in 2023, as capital was redirected toward domestic infrastructure, defense, and energy transition projects. Development assistance has also taken a hit: with budgets strained by rising defense spending and refugee support, major donors like Germany, France, and the UK have cut Official Development Assistance (ODA) by as much as 30% since 2022 (OECD, 2023), with further cuts expected.

For countries historically reliant on European markets and aid—such as Morocco, Ghana, Kenya, and Côte d'Ivoire—these reductions represent more than temporary setbacks. They signal the unraveling of an economic model—flawed yet central—built around Europe's demand. As one European market after another retrenches, the New South finds itself compelled to reassess its exposure to a faltering partner, seeking alternative strategies for economic resilience.

Ultimately, the Russia–Ukraine war has revealed a stark truth: Europe can no longer serve as a stable growth anchor for the Global South. Its economic contraction, energy dependence, and strategic inward turn signal the decline of a centuries-long dynamic. While Europe will remain an important partner in diplomacy and development, it can no longer be the center of gravity for the New South's economic ambitions.

For the Global South, this is not a crisis—it is a clarifying moment. It is a call to forge new coalitions, diversify trade and finance, and build sovereign development strategies that are insulated from external volatility. In a fractured global economy, resilience begins with realignment—and the New South now has both the agency and the imperative to drive that shift.

SHRINKING OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

The Russia–Ukraine war triggered a fundamental reallocation of fiscal priorities across Europe, with cascading consequences for the developing world. One of the most consequential yet under-discussed shifts is the sharp contraction in Official Development Assistance (ODA). Historically, ODA served as a key financial lifeline for many countries in the New South, supporting critical sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, and governance. However, as European governments pivot toward militarization and domestic economic stabilization, development assistance is increasingly being deprioritized—signaling a broader unraveling of long-standing financial dependencies.

Europe's role in the global aid architecture emerged in the aftermath of World War II and was formalized during the Cold War. Former colonial powers like the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium sought to maintain influence in their erstwhile colonies through bilateral aid programs and technical assistance, often blending humanitarian objectives with geopolitical calculations. Over time, institutions such as the European Development Fund (EDF) and national aid agencies like GIZ (Germany) and DFID (UK) institutionalized this role. Aid was framed as both a moral imperative and a strategic tool—an instrument of soft power designed to promote stability, open markets, and align the New South with Western norms and interests.

This commitment deepened in the early 2000s with the rise of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provided both a normative and financial framework for development cooperation. European donors often led global financing pledges—whether for climate adaptation, debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, or global health initiatives such as the Global Fund and GAVI Alliance. While aid was never without criticism—ranging from paternalism to conditionality—it remained a significant and often stabilizing resource flow for low- and middle-income countries.

However, the geopolitical calculus shifted dramatically after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. European defense budgets—once stagnant—have surged. Germany, long known for its postwar pacifist stance, announced a €100 billion special fund for defense, while countries like Poland, Sweden, and the UK have pledged to exceed NATO's 2% of GDP defense spending target. At the same time, European economies have faced inflationary pressures, energy crises, and rising demands for domestic social spending. As a result, development assistance—viewed by some policymakers as discretionary—has borne the brunt of this fiscal rebalancing.

As noted above, major donors such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom have reduced development aid budgets by as much as 20–30% since 2022. Much of the remaining aid has been redirected toward in-country refugee support, security cooperation with Ukraine, or reconstruction efforts within Europe's immediate neighborhood. This shift effectively re-Europeanizes development finance, sidelining distant partners in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, who now face stalled projects, discontinued grants, and uncertainty over future disbursements.

The consequences are severe. In countries historically reliant on European aid—such as Mali, Ethiopia, or Palestine—major infrastructure initiatives have been halted or delayed. Health systems dependent on donor-funded immunization or maternal health programs are experiencing resource shortfalls. Education initiatives that relied on multi-year funding have seen abrupt interruptions. Meanwhile, aid-funded climate adaptation and renewable energy projects—already lagging far behind global targets—now face further setbacks, deepening disparities in climate action.

These developments also pose systemic risks. Reduced donor flows threaten to exacerbate social discontent, governance crises, and fiscal fragility in aid-dependent states, potentially destabilizing regions already struggling with conflict, food insecurity, or debt distress. Moreover, shrinking aid undermines the credibility of multilateral commitments to the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement, exposing a growing disconnect between Northern rhetoric and Southern reality.

This evolving landscape demands a strategic reassessment within the New South. While reliance on traditional Western aid flows was historically understandable, it is no longer a viable foundation for long-term development or resilience. Instead, this moment calls for a decisive reorientation toward alternative and endogenous financing pathways.

The contraction of European development assistance is not merely a budgetary shift—it marks a turning point in the historical evolution of financial dependencies. The same powers that once shaped the global aid architecture are now retrenching behind their borders, driven by strategic insecurity and economic self-preservation. For the New South, this challenge presents an opportunity to move beyond a development model shaped in foreign capitals.

By strengthening regional solidarity, enhancing domestic resource governance, and investing in alternative financial institutions, the New South can chart a new course—one rooted in financial sovereignty, resilience, and self-defined development. This is not a rejection of global cooperation, but a redefinition of its terms. In a world no longer anchored in unipolar aid hierarchies, balance must be found in equitable partnerships, mutual respect, and shared prosperity.

THE EROSION OF WESTERN MORAL AUTHORITY

While the economic reverberations of the Russia–Ukraine war have dominated headlines, its geopolitical consequences run deeper—most notably in the waning credibility of Western moral leadership among the nations of the New South. This erosion is not merely a byproduct of the war but the culmination of long-standing grievances, now sharpened by legal contradictions and political inconsistencies. As the war exposed the selective application of international norms, recent rulings by the world's highest legal bodies—the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC)—have further deepened skepticism in the New South regarding the universality of Western-promoted legal and humanitarian standards.

The ICJ and ICC were created as institutional pillars of the post-WWII global order, intended to uphold sovereignty, human rights, and accountability. Historically, the West championed these bodies as instruments of global justice. The Nuremberg Trials, the creation of the Rome Statute, and Western leadership in prosecuting war crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia reinforced a narrative of principled commitment to a rules-based system.

However, this leadership has always been uneven. The United States has famously never ratified the Rome Statute and maintains legislation (the American Servicemembers' Protection Act) that authorizes military force to free U.S. personnel held by the ICC. The UK, France, and other Western countries have supported the court's authority—so long as it aligned with strategic interests. The result has been a pattern where the ICC appeared to focus disproportionately on African leaders,

prompting accusations of neo-colonial justice (Mutua, 2001).

These contradictions reached a new crescendo in 2023–2024, when the ICJ and ICC turned their attention to Israel's actions in Gaza during its military campaign following Hamas's deadly attacks in October 2023. South Africa, invoking the Genocide Convention, brought a case before the ICJ alleging that Israel's military conduct—including mass displacement, infrastructure destruction, and the high death toll among civilians—amounted to acts of genocide. In its January 2024 interim ruling, the ICJ did not pronounce on guilt or innocence but ordered Israel to prevent genocidal acts, ensure humanitarian access, and preserve evidence of potential violations. Subsequent Israeli actions have cemented the strong belief that the Court's ruling and qualification were accurate and demanded international action to prevent genocide.

Shortly thereafter, the ICC Prosecutor announced an investigation into war crimes committed by all parties, including potential charges against Israeli officials for disproportionate use of force and targeting civilians. These legal moves were celebrated across much of the Global South as long-overdue efforts to apply international law consistently, irrespective of geopolitical alliances.

However, reactions from Western capitals were striking in their defensiveness, dismissiveness, and, in some cases, outright rejection. U.S. officials criticized the ICJ case as "baseless and politically motivated," while prominent European leaders expressed unease with what they called "judicial overreach." The ICC's inquiry faced immediate political backlash, with some Western parliaments threatening to withdraw support or impose sanctions on the court's officials—echoing similar responses when the ICC attempted to investigate U.S. actions in Afghanistan (HRW, 2024).

In a move that underscored the growing schism between international legal norms and geopolitical allegiances, the newly appointed German Chancellor declared that he would welcome the indicted Israeli Prime Minister to Berlin, regardless of any arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. This statement, framed as an affirmation of Germany's "historic responsibility" and "unshakable solidarity" with Israel, effectively signals Berlin's readiness to sidestep a judicial body it had long supported.

The announcement sent ripples through European capitals: in Paris, officials offered only vague affirmations of "commitment to international law" while sidestepping any mention of enforcement; in Rome, the government was conspicuously silent, clearly torn between its Atlanticist loyalties and its role in the European legal order. Other Western capitals issued carefully worded statements that betrayed unease, revealing an uncomfortable truth—when legal principles collide with strategic alliances, even the architects of the international system are willing to look the other way.

This contrasted sharply with Western enthusiasm for these same legal institutions when they responded to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The ICC's March 2023 arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin on charges related to the deportation of Ukrainian children was welcomed across NATO countries as a triumph of justice. European leaders lined up to reaffirm their support for the court and pledged increased funding and access.

This selective embrace of legal institutions has dramatically undermined Western credibility in the New South. For many, it confirms what scholars and diplomats have long warned: that international law is often treated not as a universal framework but as an instrument of geopolitical convenience. When the law indicts rivals, it is applauded; when it challenges allies, it is maligned.

This disillusionment echoes earlier periods of legal inconsistency—from the refusal to hold U.S. leaders accountable for the invasion of Iraq to the shielding of Israeli actions in previous Gaza conflicts, despite repeated UN reports documenting violations of international humanitarian law.

For a generation of Global South leaders, jurists, and activists, the message is clear: the global legal order remains structurally skewed in favor of power, not justice.

These contradictions have accelerated a strategic recalibration within the New South. Nations are increasingly moving away from exclusive reliance on Western institutions and are embracing multipolar diplomacy to safeguard their interests. The emerging consensus is not anti-Western but post-Western: it prioritizes strategic autonomy, regional solidarity, and legal pluralism.

This shift is evident in the growing prominence of regional legal and human rights frameworks—such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, ASEAN's Human Rights Declaration, and Latin America's Inter-American system. Though imperfect, these institutions represent efforts to re-anchor legal accountability within regional political cultures, rather than depending on selectively applied global mechanisms.

Furthermore, in multilateral forums like the G77, BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement, Global South countries are articulating an alternative vision of justice and legitimacy—one rooted in historical memory, political dignity, and structural reform. Their calls for UN Security Council reform, equal representation in the IMF and World Bank, and a fairer international legal order now rest on increasingly unassailable ground: the West's own double standards.

The erosion of Western moral authority is no longer a theoretical concept—it has become institutional. When the world's most powerful democracies selectively support or undermine the very legal institutions they helped create, they invite not only critique but also disengagement. For the Global South, this moment is a clarifying one: norms must be consistent, or they will be contested; laws must be universal, or they will be replaced.

In the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war and the Gaza conflict, the New South is not merely reacting—it is redefining the moral geography of international politics. In place of moral hegemony, it is asserting moral pluralism. In place of dependency, it is constructing strategic autonomy. And in place of passive alignment, it is pursuing a more balanced, multipolar, and principled approach to global governance.

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC REALISM AND THE NEW SOUTH'S PATH IN A POST-UKRAINE WAR WORLD

In the realist tradition of international relations, global politics is not defined by shared values or universal norms but by the pursuit of power, the primacy of national interest, and the enduring reality of an anarchic international system. The Russia–Ukraine war has not altered this fundamental logic—it has merely exposed its brutal clarity. For the countries of the New South, the war has served as a vivid reminder that, in moments of global disruption, states must rely on themselves, not on promises of solidarity from distant powers or institutions designed without their input.

The geopolitical and geoeconomic fallout from the war—ranging from food and energy insecurity to financial volatility and shrinking Western development assistance—has revealed a hard truth: the liberal international order is not neutral, and it is not global. It reflects the interests of those who constructed and continue to dominate it. The selective enforcement of international law, the instrumental use of humanitarian rhetoric, and the redirection of aid and diplomacy toward European priorities illustrate what realists have long argued: international institutions and norms are tools of statecraft, not constraints on power.

For decades, the New South engaged with the Western-led order under the belief that integration

would bring development, stability, and influence. Yet, crisis after crisis—be it the debt shocks of the 1980s, the Iraq War, the COVID-19 vaccine hoarding, or now the Russia–Ukraine conflict—has revealed a stark reality: the benefits of global governance are unequally distributed, while the burdens fall disproportionately on the weak.

In response, the New South must adopt a strategic posture that reflects the realist imperative: to maximize autonomy, reduce external vulnerabilities, and enhance leverage through regional and cross-bloc alignments.

This requires several deliberate recalibrations:

- **Power Through Self-Reliance:**

Food security, energy resilience, and fiscal stability are no longer just developmental goals—they are core pillars of state power. Investing in domestic capacity, regional supply chains, and sovereign wealth management is essential for states seeking to avoid manipulation through external dependencies.

- **Strategic Hedging, Not Moral Alignment:**

The age of ideological alliances is over. The New South must pursue diversified partnerships—cooperating with China, Russia, the West, or regional actors—based on calculated interests, not loyalty to any bloc. Strategic autonomy means avoiding entanglement in great power rivalries while maximizing benefit from competing suitors.

- **Instrumental Engagement with Institutions:**

The IMF, World Bank, WTO, and UN will remain relevant, but they should be approached pragmatically, not reverentially. Where possible, they should be reformed to better reflect emerging power realities; where not, parallel structures like the BRICS New Development Bank or regional trade pacts should be strengthened to serve as counterweights.

- **Assertive Regionalism:**

In a fragmented global system, regional alliances offer the best platform for coordinated bargaining, shared infrastructure investment, and collective security. The African Union, ASEAN, Mercosur, and other blocs must be fortified as instruments of leverage—not as alternatives to the international system, but as force multipliers within it.

Realism teaches that sovereignty is the foremost currency of power, and in times of systemic stress, states must prioritize survival over solidarity, autonomy over alignment, and leverage over loyalty. The war in Ukraine has shown that major powers will always act in pursuit of their own interests. The lesson for the New South is not to condemn this behavior, but to emulate it.

The post-war world will be messy, multipolar, and competitive. In such an environment, the New South must not seek fairness—it must seek advantage. It must act not as a victim of global currents, but as a coalition of rational actors with converging interests in strategic diversification, policy sovereignty, and geopolitical self-determination.

Realism does not promise justice, but it provides a map for navigating an unequal world. For the New South, that map begins with this insight: only power secures respect, and only independence secures survival.

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Ferid Belhaj took up the position of World Bank Vice President for Middle East and North Africa on July 1, 2018. Prior to this, he served as the Chief of Staff of the President of the World Bank Group for 15 months.From 2012 to 2017, Mr. Belhaj was World Bank Director for the Middle East, in charge of work programs in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Iran, based in Beirut, Lebanon. In this capacity, he led the Bank's engagement on the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on the region, including the creation of new financing instruments to help countries hosting forcibly displaced people; the ramping up of the Bank drive towards the reconstruction and recovery of Iraq during and after the ISIS invasion and the scaling up of the Bank's commitments to Lebanon and Jordan.

Before taking up his Mashreq assignment, Mr. Belhaj served as World Bank Director for the Pacific Department (2009-2012), where he developed a regional strategy that scaled up Bank engagement in small and fragile states, and tripled lending operations of the International Development Agency, one of the five institutions under the umbrella of the World Bank Group that provides interest-free loans and grants for Low-Income Countries. From 2007 to 2010, Mr. Belhaj was the World Bank's Special Representative to the United Nations (UN) in New York, where he engaged with various UN agencies on a range of programs, mainly climate change, the Millennium Development Goals, fragile and post-conflict states and the global financial and food crises.

ABOUT THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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