

# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS



## Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!

**Why Many States Are Not Taking Sides  
and What That Means for Us**



# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

2 | 2023

## Editorial

Dear Readers,

When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disintegrated, it was more than just the final chord of a conflict in power politics between East and West: it was also the end of a clash between two disparate systems, two world views. The concept of the liberal market democracy had prevailed over the utopia of a communist world revolution. In the West in particular, a period of optimism began. Now that this clash of ideologies had dissolved, democracy could triumph across the globe – or so many people thought at the time.

Today, more than 30 years later, we know that many of these hopes have not been fulfilled. And anyone following the foreign policy debate in Germany will notice that one concept in particular is increasingly finding its way into discussions, evoking memories of the bloc confrontation of the Cold War: the notion of a “systemic conflict”.

Is this systemic opposition between democracy and authoritarianism the key factor shaping today’s geopolitical developments? To what extent do states outside the West share this interpretation? And should this “systemic conflict” provide the main interpretative framework in the field of foreign policy for us as Germans, Europeans and Western allies?

First of all, it is important to note that certain characteristics of the increasing confrontation between the Western states on the one hand and China, Russia and several other states on the other hand are indeed reminiscent of a systemic conflict. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that China – in the totalitarian organisation of its own state and beyond – is attempting to relativise the international standards that have emerged since 1945 with regard to human rights or the rule of law in favour of its own authoritarian standards. In other words, China today is not only seeking global redistribution of power within the existing system; it also wants to change the underlying rules of that system to our disadvantage. In view of this, we must strengthen our own competitiveness, economic independence and also our military deterrent potential and stand up resolutely for our liberal interpretation of fundamental concepts such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy in the relevant international bodies, in terms of both substance and strategy.

The rise of new major powers has always created tensions in the international order, however, and it is plausible to assume that there would be friction between the Western states that have dominated the world over the past decades and a rising power such as China even irrespective of differences in terms of political systems. And we should be more open than in the past – both to the public at home and to the outside world – about the fact that our foreign policy does not and cannot always be determined by moral considerations alone, but that it is also subject to necessities, constraints and our own interests. After all, many states outside the West have quite a keen sense of when we are “preaching water but drinking wine”, as Sabina Wölkner writes in this issue of International Reports.

Yet it is precisely these partners outside the West that we will need in the current geopolitical struggle. And here the vital question is whether or not it makes sense to view current developments primarily through the lens of a systemic conflict between democracy and autocracy – and to loudly proclaim this at every opportunity. The articles in this issue show clearly that there is reason to doubt this. Whether you read Susanne Käss’ analysis of a democratic state like Argentina, look at Lewe Paul’s article on India or consider Anna Reismann’s article on Uganda and Canan Atilgan’s on the states of North Africa and the Middle East: none of the countries in focus shows even the slightest inclination to fit into a bloc logic of any kind or to make abstract normative issues the guiding principle of their own foreign policy. This is even true of states in the South Caucasus, which are well aware that the EU and Russia stand for two fundamentally different political and social models and – like Georgia and Armenia – essentially have a clear preference for the Western model: they still shy away from taking a stand against Russia for security policy reasons, as Stephan Malerius points out in his article.

What dominates across all continents is that nations are following a pragmatic policy guided by their own concrete interests, geared far less towards fundamental principles than towards what they can achieve for themselves in the respective situation. The fact that many states avoid taking sides – either for the West or for its challengers – has varying reasons, sometimes of a historical nature. And that policy is perfectly rational from those states’ point of view. On the one hand, no one wants to join the

side that might eventually lose the global conflict, which is why many actors simply want to wait and see who “wins”. On the other hand, a nation that does not commit itself and is courted by both sides can push up the “price” for offering its support. In their foreign policy actions, not even democracies are automatically partners to the West on all issues and in some cases have considerably different perceptions and positions, for example with regard to Russia. This is true of Brazil, Mexico and India, but also of the NATO partner Turkey. Conversely, even hard autocracies are not necessarily close partners of China or Russia.

What does this mean in terms of our German and European foreign policy? Firstly, we will to some extent have to accept the sober, pragmatic – one might say “transactional” – approach adopted by many states. This requires us to undertake a realistic assessment and be open to other countries’ perspectives, interests and constraints, coupled with the ability to compare their interests with our own as we identify overlaps and then harness them consistently. As Andrea Ostheimer points out in her article, there is an overlap with many states in the defence of certain fundamental principles of the UN Charter, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Here, we can forge alliances that extend far beyond the group of Western nations or even that of democratic states.

Secondly, it means we must be prepared to invest in relations with potential partner states in the long term and not just on a crisis-oriented basis. In individual cases, responding to their interests, for example in trade or arms partnerships, may entail looking beyond our own short-term economic benefit if this offers the prospect of binding the respective state closer to us politically in the medium term.

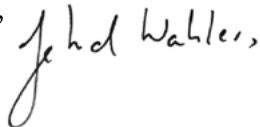
Finally, we have to recognise that while there are no “good dictators” from our point of view, as every dictatorship by its very nature restricts human rights and runs counter to what we stand for, it would at the same time be irrational to limit the circle of our potential foreign policy partners to democracies – let alone liberal democracies – from the outset. Caroline Kanter is right when she states in this issue: “when it comes to our foreign relations, not all autocrats are the same.”

There are quite a number of states in the world whose political and social systems do not correspond to our ideal, but which – unlike Russia and, increasingly, China – do not regard themselves as our adversaries or behave as such. Engaging with these countries on the basis of a purist interpretation of our values and standards is unlikely to bring any of these countries closer to our values, but it does risk driving them even further into the arms of the revisionist powers, thereby strengthening the latter’s position in terms of global power. While a pragmatic approach will not immediately turn such states into friends, it does mean that we can stay open to cooperation on those issues where there are common interests, thereby helping prevent the global balance of power from tipping in favour of China and Russia and, thus, ultimately doing better service to our values as well.

It is true that there is a global systemic conflict. In order to compete successfully within this conflict, we should bear it in mind at all times, but not constantly talk about it to third parties. We should focus more on pragmatic action and less on outward posturing and high-publicity declarations that are often aimed primarily at a receptive domestic audience.

I hope you will find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers," with a stylized flourish at the end.

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**Dr Gerhard Wahlers** is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).



Voting Started

Item 5 - Draft resolution A/ES-11/L5 (Territorial integrity of Ukraine)

12-Oct-22 16:13:03

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#ALBANIA	#CHILE	#GREECE
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#ANGOLA	#COMOROS	#GUINEA
#ANTIGUA-BARBUDA	#CONGO	#GUINEA-BISSAU
#ARGENTINA	#COSTA RICA	#GUYANA
#ARMENIA	#COTE D'IVOIRE	#HAITI
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#AUSTRIA	#CUBA	#HUNGARY
#AZERBAIJAN	#CYPRUS	#ICELAND
#BAHAMAS	#CZECHIA	#INDIA
#BAHRAIN	#DEM PR OF KOREA	#INDONESIA
#BANGLADESH	#DEM REP OF THE CONGO	#IRAN (ISLAMIC REPUBLIC...)
#BARBADOS	#DENMARK	#IRAQ
#BELARUS	#DJIBOUTI	#IRELAND
#BELGIUM	#DOMINICA	#ISRAEL
#BELIZE	#DOMINICAN REP...	#ITALY
#BENIN	#ECUADOR	#JAMAICA
#BHUTAN	#EGYPT	#JAPAN
#BOLIVIA	#EL SALVADOR	#JORDAN
#BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	#EQUATORIAL GUINEA	#KAZAKHSTAN
#BOTSWANA	#ERITREA	#KENYA
#BRAZIL	#ESTONIA	#KIRIBATI
#BRUNEI DARUSSALAM	#ESWATINI	#KUWAIT
#BULGARIA	#ETHIOPIA	#KYRGYZSTAN
BURKINA FASO	#FIJI	#LAO PDR
#BURUNDI	#FINLAND	#LATVIA
#CABO VERDE	#FRANCE	#LEBANON
#CAMBODIA	#GABON	#LESOTHO
CAMEROON	#GAMBIA	#LIBERIA
#CANADA	#GEORGIA	#LIBYA
#CENTRAL AFR REP...	#GERMANY	#LIECHTENSTEIN

IN FAVOR: 243

AGAINST: 5

ABSTENTION: 25



# SYSTEMIC CONFLICT? NO THANKS!

Why Many States Are Not Taking Sides  
and What That Means for Us





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Not just freedom versus dictatorship: The UN General Assembly during a vote on Russia’s war against Ukraine. While some autocratic states joined those voting against Moscow, some democratic governments failed to do so. Photo: © Lev Radin, Pacific Press, picture alliance.



*under discussion*

Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!

# “We Need to Stop Looking at Things Solely from a European Perspective”

On “Value-driven Pragmatism” in Foreign Policy  
and the Work of Political Foundations

An Interview with Caroline Kanter

Being pragmatic is not the same as being arbitrary or betraying your values – in fact, it is an imperative for German and European foreign policy, says Caroline Kanter, new Deputy Head of the European and International Cooperation Department at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, in an interview with International Reports. She explains why this applies equally to the work done by the foundation abroad.

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*International Reports (IR): Ms Kanter, the term “systemic conflict” frequently crops up in the debate on foreign policy here in Germany. According to this narrative, we are witnessing a stand-off between liberal democracies and authoritarian rulers as they wrestle over the future structure of the international order. The idea is that the world is caught up in a conflict of values. Yet as frequently becomes apparent in this issue of International Reports, many non-Western states do not see a systemic conflict, nor do they feel that they have to position themselves. What is your view: is there a systemic conflict or not?*

**Caroline Kanter:** If we look at the Western states – first and foremost the United States – on the one hand and China on the other, since these two are generally regarded as the main rivals, we can see that this is certainly about competing systems and world views. So to some extent the debate does revolve around the antithesis between freedom and authoritarianism. If we look at the current global political constellation, however, this antithesis is not the only key factor. On the one hand, it is indeed a more complex phenomenon that goes beyond a “great power conflict”. On the other hand, in addition to the starkly contrasting political and social systems, it also involves a clash between interests that are simply very distinct and sometimes contradictory. An entirely different question – but perhaps one that is crucial here – is, in my view, the position adopted by the numerous states that are not among the main players and how these other states actually behave.

*IR: Looking at the articles in this issue, there can be little doubt, as already mentioned, that the notion of a “systemic conflict” is simply not shared by a large number of countries. What conclusions can we draw from this in terms of German foreign policy?*

**Kanter:** You’re absolutely right: in some cases, the countries concerned don’t see a systemic conflict, while in others they may see the conflict but are unwilling to get involved in it and deliberately avoid taking sides. So there are essentially two things we need here. Firstly, we have to define the following for ourselves: what are our values and what are our interests? And in view of this, which countries can we cooperate with more closely in the future? What resources do we want to deploy and to what extent are we an attractive partner for these countries?

In this connection, it is impossible to ignore the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between freedom, stability and security in terms of our foreign policy focus. This is something we have to face up to as we weigh up how far we are willing to go in advocating these values and interests.

In my discussions with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's international partners, I keep noticing that many countries – in Europe and far beyond – expect Germany to play a more active role at the international level. We haven't done enough to live up to this expectation in the past. We now need to look at this more closely so as to establish where we can pursue partnerships more intensely with countries that share our interest in a common future based on an international set of rules. This is not just a question of being more active, however: we have to proceed more strategically, too. The focus in the past was on aspects of economic and trade policy. Since the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, if not before, it has become clear that we need to be more strategic and take geopolitical factors into account in our foreign and security policy. The recently published National Security Strategy addresses this necessity. Nevertheless, in the medium term, we will be judged by the concrete measures we take and the results they produce.

*IR: So we firstly have to be clear about what we want. And secondly?*

**Kanter:** Secondly, as Germans and Europeans, we simply have to accept the fact that many states around the world gear their position very pragmatically towards their own interests. We must bear in mind, for example, that while we tend to regard the war of aggression against Ukraine as a watershed moment – a so-called *Zeitenwende*, or “turning point” in history – in other parts of the world, especially in the Global South, it is seen as a geographically distant conflict, even though the consequences of this war are felt globally. We have to acknowledge that some of these states don't want to bow to the pressure of having to choose one side or the other but prefer to pursue their own genuine interests in the regional and global context.

This “non-alignment” is something we have to acknowledge. We can't divide the world into two camps against the will of other countries and impose our view on them. Instead, we need to stop looking at things solely from a German and European perspective for once and develop an awareness and an understanding of other countries' interests, points of view and constraints. I'm thinking here of India, for example, which has maintained close military relations with Russia for years and where Russian weapons account for by far the largest share of the military arsenal. So if we call on India to withdraw from this cooperation, we have to come up with alternatives. What we have to do is compare these states' expectations with our own positions and identify the points where it is possible to pursue common interests and define common strategic goals.

*IR: In other words, you're appealing for more pragmatism. Does this leave room for our much-cited values?*

**Kanter:** Of course, we have values, and we are guided by these values – they underpin our sense of identity and our political actions. Incidentally, this is what sets us apart from some of the other players in international politics. But it's important for us to consider on a case-by-case basis what weight we want to attach to these values in our relations with a particular state. And also, how we want to advocate these values and how strongly. You might call this "value-driven pragmatism". Being pragmatic is not the same as being arbitrary: it means you have a certain aim or a certain value, but you need to ask yourself in each situation whether a particular action or statement will actually help you get closer to achieving this goal or value, or whether it is simply self-affirming and ultimately counter-productive in terms of the practical outcome. We should therefore focus much more on achieving the goal and not merely on proclaiming our commitment to this goal.

What is more, it can't hurt to demonstrate a little humility: when it comes to foreign policy action, we should ask ourselves from time to time whether we ourselves are always able to meet at home the demands and standards we propagate abroad. I also think it is up to us, as part of the public debate, to point out certain dilemmas in foreign and security policy, to explain them and hence to meet people here on their own terms and raise their awareness.

*IR: More generally, the question is whether or not we as Europeans are actually still in a position to dictate our conditions and standards at all.*

**Kanter:** The answer to that is no. Today, countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia usually have a number of options to choose from: they aren't dependent on Western partners, so they are not queuing up to cooperate with us. Self-confident and guided by their interests, these countries weigh up which partnerships might benefit them most, and they look closely at the terms and conditions brought up by a potential partner. Take the example of South America. For decades, the EU has been working on an association agreement with the Mercosur trade alliance. We essentially have a fully negotiated text, but some European states are focusing too much on their own agricultural interests and environmental standards, and in doing so they are jeopardising ratification of the agreement. Here, a pragmatic attitude would be helpful that takes greater account of the overall geopolitical context. Our approach to date risks making the Mercosur countries turn away from us and give preference to other countries instead. If this happens, we won't get any closer to meeting our standards: we'll simply lose influence. So we have to be aware of the risk of failing to act, too. We shouldn't be too hesitant and allow too much time to pass: other competitors – attractive potential partners for the Latin American states – are waiting in the wings.



Wrong priorities: If the EU and its member states continue to delay partnerships for domestic political reasons, as is happening with the association agreement with South American Mercosur, which has been under negotiation for almost 25 years, new spaces will keep opening up for Beijing and Moscow. [Photo: © Arne Dedert, dpa, picture alliance.](#)

*IR: But when it gets down to the concrete details, pragmatism in foreign policy means not only giving up on maximum demands in terms of environmental standards but also engaging with autocrats. This quickly attracts criticism. For example, the German government's ongoing efforts to obtain natural gas supplies from the Gulf since last year have led some people to say that Germany has learned nothing from what happened with Russia and is now simply looking to purchase energy from different autocrats. Does this argument hold water?*

**Kanter:** That doesn't tell the whole story in my view. It's important for

us not to become unilaterally dependent on another state again, particularly not on an authoritarian one. The acid test here will be our relationship with China. All in all, I'm in favour of a pragmatic and nuanced consideration of each individual case. We have to be honest here: when it comes to our foreign relations, not all autocrats are the same. Russia's war of aggression violates Ukraine's sovereignty, so the current Russian regime simply can't be a partner for us. As we cast around for new partnerships globally or seek to strengthen existing ones, we should be guided by the question of whether we can pursue an international rules-based order together

that is accepted and embraced in practice by the respective actors. A nuanced approach when assessing partners should also take into account the regional role and global significance of the country in question. Another relevant question is that of political stability.

We need to be prudent and pragmatic rather than Eurocentric in our assessments and expectations, as illustrated by developments in North Africa, for example. The hopes we Europeans placed in the “Arab Spring” were not fulfilled. After a little more than ten years, we have to conclude that democracy has not taken hold and that in some cases we’re dealing with autocracies. But here, too, I would advise against closing the door completely. Instead, we should weigh up how to deal with each state in the future. After all, the developments in these countries have a direct and indirect impact on Europe, and there are issues we should be working on together. Here I’m thinking of the energy transition in particular, but there are obviously the challenges of dealing with migration, too.

*IR: So you don't think much of the idea that Europe should withdraw into itself economically as far as possible, at most maintaining key trade relations with like-minded democratic states – in other words, pursue a policy of “friendshoring”?*

**Kanter:** I would expressly warn against such ideas, since they ultimately amount to a new form of protectionism. On the contrary, we should be pushing for new free trade agreements – and not only with the Mercosur states I mentioned a moment ago. The conclusion to draw from our experience with Russia should not be self-sufficiency but diversification – in other words broadly based trade relations so as to avoid dependence on individual actors. The challenge here will be how to maintain our values while operating in contexts that are complex but strategically important to us. If we look at the mining of critical resources, for example, it becomes clear that we also need to think about linking trade and development policy more closely than in the past.

*IR: Many of the issues and dilemmas we've discussed here also apply to the international cooperation work pursued by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. We have international offices in more than 80 countries on all continents and operate in well over 100 countries. The guiding principle of the foundation is “shaping democracy together”. But if we look at the relevant democracy indices, we soon see that this is not fully possible in all of these countries in the way we'd ideally like. And things are not necessarily getting any better either, the catchword here being “shrinking spaces”. What can we do about this?*

**Kanter:** It’s true that spaces of pluralism are closing – or at least becoming narrower. Some of the problems we’ve just discussed with regard to official German and European foreign policy are also relevant to the work done by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung abroad. And I believe the processes we engage in when it comes to weighing up solutions, and the answers to these problems should be similar to those we just talked about.

Let's take the issue of values, for example. All the partners we work with internationally know what we stand for and what we're aiming to achieve. We're not politically neutral and we stand by that. We're a German political foundation that follows fundamental Christian Democratic convictions. In concrete terms, this means that we attach key importance to the dignity of the individual, we stand up for democracy, the rule of law and the social market economy, and European integration and transatlantic relations are of particular concern to us. These are the values that guide us and provide us with orientation in our concrete project work on the different continents. Nonetheless: for us, too, having values and goals is not the same as showcasing them in every situation and in every relationship. It's a weighing-up process that involves defining what is opportune in which setting and at what point in time. This has a lot to do with respectful communication, too, and not least with credibility. Are we going to criticise states in public discourse? Do we presume to regard our view as the ultimate standard? Or do we seek to engage in dialogue? The public stage is not always the appropriate setting: it is often used to address a domestic audience and not primarily the society of the country concerned.

And of course, we can still be successful in pursuing our goals through concrete projects without having to attach labels that might cause friction in other cultures, even though such labels might be popular in Germany. Here I'm thinking of the area of political participation: for decades now, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has been committed to strengthening political participation among women and young politicians worldwide, and we implement educational measures to promote these social groups in political office. This is something we need to continue to do in a pragmatic way without giving it a new label. This is how we gain support from our local partners.

*IR: So you think our, too, work needs to be based on “value-driven pragmatism”?*

**Kanter:** You could certainly call it that. We'll repeatedly be faced

with the decision of how to deal with the shrinking spaces you just mentioned: do we make the most of the space we have left, or do we withdraw from a country where we don't have – or no longer have – the space we would like? This brings me back once again to a principle I mentioned at the beginning: we have to focus on pragmatic, case-by-case decisions. For us at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, too, one important issue is what relevance a particular country has within its region, but also in the global context. There may be cases – and there actually have been in the past – where we come to the conclusion that involvement in the country concerned is no longer worthwhile because our room for manoeuvre has become too narrow and cooperation with our partners in civil society or in the political domain in the respective countries is no longer possible. But there are sometimes cases in which the benefits of our presence outweigh any limitations we may face on the ground.





Are all autocracies the same? Not being democrats is what the Emir of Qatar and the Russian President have in common. But when it comes to the question of whether they can be foreign policy partners for Germany and Europe, other criteria must also be taken into consideration. [Photo: © Vyacheslav Prokofyev, AP, picture alliance.](#)

*IR: Can you give us an example of such benefits?*

**Kanter:** In some cases, it can be of enormous value just to be able to observe developments on the ground in a particular country and make our analyses available to the public and decision-makers in Germany. We talked earlier about the fact that as Germans and Europeans we can't simply impose our views and values on other countries but must pragmatically respond to their interests and perspectives – but this means we need to have a realistic picture of what those are. I think we can make a very significant contribution here based on the country-specific expertise that we generate through our dense network of offices.

We sometimes tend to be guided more by wishful thinking than by the political realities on the ground, which means we're surprised when things don't develop the way we expected or would like. And by the way, this applies not only to developments on other continents but in the European context too, where we're sometimes surprised at the electoral choices people make. We aim to use our local presence to help build a sound basis for making assessments. This presence, especially through local partners, enables us to gain insights at an early stage so that we can identify changes and trends.

*IR: One obvious objection would be that Germany already has at least as dense a network of official government offices abroad, namely its embassies and consulates.*

**Kanter:** I think their work and that of the political foundations complement each other in some respects, which also means that we as a foundation can do things the diplomatic missions sometimes can't. The diplomatic corps primarily maintains relations with the government of the host country – that's what it's supposed to do. So here there is no option of “choosing” who you engage with.

As a political foundation, we enter into partnerships in countries that respect our values and share our interests. Our partners are often political parties – whether in government or in opposition. On the one hand, this means that we may have already been working with certain actors for many years before they move into decision-making positions, as a result of which we have direct access and deeper bonds of trust. Secondly, in my opinion, that often enables us to detect political developments in our host countries at a particularly early stage.

What is more, our target groups and priorities differ from those of the diplomatic actors: we maintain close relations with civil society organisations and with academic institutions and think tanks. This enables us to perform a kind of “gauging and explaining” function: we can tap into issues that are relevant in other regions of the world early on and introduce them in the German and European debate. In this connection, I'm particularly thinking of the regional programmes we launched several years ago that are dedicated to the topic of climate and energy security. Here, we succeeded at an early stage in focusing more on the Arctic – which is relevant both geostrategically and from the point of view of security and resources – and in highlighting the positions of the Arctic states. Another example is the field of artificial intelligence: our presence in Asia is crucial if we want to identify trends, new policy approaches and experiences and feed these into the European debate. In my view, our work abroad offers enormous added value through this transfer of knowledge and the possibility of feeding information back to Germany and Europe.

*IR: So if in doubt, it's better to leave a door open?*

**Kanter:** Absolutely. We've talked a lot about shrinking spaces – and unfortunately, we have to acknowledge realistically that this phenomenon is growing rather than declining worldwide. But there are positive developments where new spaces are opening up, too, and we can identify these spaces early on due to our presence on the ground, enabling us to actively promote closer relations.

And we shouldn't forget the role as a “door-opener” when it comes to intensifying existing partnerships. In recent years, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has, in my view, taken a good strategic look at where we can gain important points of access, partnerships and sources of information through new locations so as to intensify relations in like-minded nations, thus allowing us to advance a shared commitment to a rules-based international order. Here I'm thinking of our new offices in Canada, Australia and in Stockholm for the Nordic countries – all democratic partner countries that are closely linked to us.

But there's also our office in Baghdad, which enables us to be very close to the developments in this important country and maintain direct dialogue with the actors on the ground. We also want to send a signal that we're interested in developments there and that there shouldn't be a vacuum that is filled by others. After all, that is a reality and to some extent a failure on our part: in both Africa and Latin America, we've allowed free spaces to emerge that are now occupied by autocratic actors – regional and global forces. I think that, based on strategic decisions and partnership-oriented action, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has positioned itself well in recent years to be able to tackle global challenges with the support of partners worldwide.

*The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.*

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**Caroline Kanter** has been Deputy Head of the European and International Cooperation Department of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung since April 2023. Her previous work for the foundation included positions as Head of the offices in Rome and in Paris.



Photo: © John Angellino, newscorn, picture alliance.

[Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!](#)

# “Nobody Wants to Be on the Wrong Side of History”

Systemic Rivalry and Unity in Defence of the UN Charter

[Andrea Ellen Ostheimer](#)

In view of the Russian attack on Ukraine, a clear majority of states around the world are demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the neighboring country when called to vote in the United Nations General Assembly. And yet there are considerable differences in their willingness to impose sanctions and in the interpretation of the conflict and its geopolitical background. Many countries see no reason to clearly choose one global political camp. Their UN representatives present various arguments to explain that position – and the West should listen to them.

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The debate and voting during the Emergency Special Session on Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 23 February 2023 has shown that the international community remains overwhelmingly united in condemning Russia's violation of the UN Charter in its aggression against Ukraine. A total of 141 states voted in favour of resolution ES-11/6, demanding "that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, and call[ing] for a cessation of hostilities".<sup>1</sup> But beyond this show of solidarity in defence of the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, positions and opinions have begun to differ one year after the invasion.

Sanctions on Russia have largely been imposed by the United States, the EU and EU member states, while others have decided not to follow this path. Many countries in the Global South perceive the war as a conflict between the West and Russia. They do not want to be dragged into one camp but would rather remain neutral. For more than a year now, the US and European governments have tried to canvass support from the international community for Ukraine, shaping the narrative that defending Ukraine means defending the rules-based order and the future of freedom itself. In recent months, various European leaders have also argued that neutrality in this conflict is tantamount to supporting the aggressor.

The present article summarises eleven confidential background conversations held in New York between March and May 2023 with permanent representatives to the United Nations from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> The overall guiding question was how states that are represented in the G77 group,<sup>3</sup> are members of the Security Council or are the subject of discussions in the Security Council perceive the narrative, promoted by the West, of a systemic conflict in relation to the war in Ukraine and to the increasing rivalry and tensions between the United States and China in the multilateral context.

The author examined whether the United States and Europe are perceived as putting too much pressure on other states to take sides, and whether the argument of the West about defending freedom and human rights might alienate those governments who themselves do not honour these values in their own domestic context. Should those states who align their foreign policy with particular values show more flexibility and seek closer cooperation with those states who do not share their values-based orientation in order to address global challenges? The author also wanted to know why a group of more than 30 states abstained from the voting on the UNGA resolutions relating to the war in Ukraine. In relation to the systemic rivalry between the United States and China, which now goes beyond mere competition, the author also asked the interlocutors how they perceive this situation.

The following summary reflects the opinions and positions of the interviewed permanent representatives at the United Nations in New York. Factual information has been added by the author.

## Neither the Arab world nor African countries want to confront Russia.

### The Charter of the United Nations: The Lowest Common Denominator

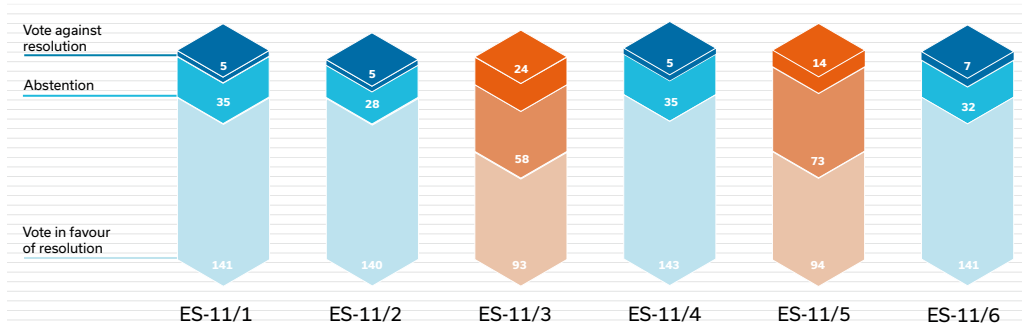
As the six votes on Ukraine in the UN General Assembly have shown, the international community largely stands united behind the UN Charter and in defence of the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and non-interference. A closer look at the six corresponding resolutions tabled in 2022 and 2023 reveals that resolution ES-11/3 on Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council and resolution ES-11/5 demanding accountability and compensation did not find

the same overwhelming support that the other four resolutions garnered.

On the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, permanent representatives highlighted that a) states with a questionable human rights record themselves did not want to create a precedent; and b) they saw the measure as counterproductive for keeping channels of communication open with Russia. From a diplomatic perspective, the objectives of multilateralism are to have everybody around the table and to find a solution to problems through negotiations. Along these lines, exclusion as an act of punishment is not seen as an adequate way to proceed as it precludes diplomatic engagement. Moreover, from a diplomatic point of view, the arrest warrant for Putin issued by the International Criminal Court is considered to be detrimental. It is seen as further cornering the Russian leader and as a potential burden for a negotiation process.<sup>4</sup>

A majority of the G77 states sees the “rules-based order” as a concept of the West, and some of them perceive it as an instrument to cement the dominance and influence of the United States.

**Fig. 1: Voting Pattern in the UN General Assembly on Resolutions on the Russian War against Ukraine**



Sources: own illustration with data from UN 2022: Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43jJ6js> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43h0ipZ> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44yfEr7> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44ANBHI> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44fOxkX> [31 May 2023]; UN 2023: Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3D1FQ1t> [31 May 2023].

To those states, China's narrative that international law, and thus the Charter of the United Nations, needs to be upheld is more appealing.

The West therefore succeeds in rallying support only in cases where it calls for the defence of the UN principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and non-interference. This is the lowest common denominator that unites the international community. Any attempt to condemn and hold Russia accountable in a multilateral context at the current stage of the conflict meets with limited support. Neither the Arab world nor African countries want to confront Russia. For the attentive observer, this division between the United States, Europe and their closest allies on one side and the remaining countries on the other became clear during the debates in the UNGA and the Security Council on the anniversary of the Russian invasion in February 2023. Whereas all European foreign ministers and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy spoke in both UN bodies, the voices from Africa and Asia were only sporadic and at ambassadorial level. In the Security Council, this divide was even more obvious as, apart from members of the Security Council, only European representatives took the floor as external speakers. Even though resolution ES-11/6 does not explicitly condemn the invasion, as this had been a point of controversy in the negotiations, many European speakers in the UNGA debate in February 2023 emphasised the need for a united condemnation of the invasion.

## Rising food and energy prices are jeopardising progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Abstentions in Voting: A Tell-all of Geopolitical Dynamics, Perceptions and Grievances**

Irrespective of the argument that the international community must unite in defence of the

UN charter, a group of more than 30 member states has decided to abstain in the voting on those resolutions that put the protection of UN principles at the heart of their message.

Four recurrent motivations for abstaining can be identified:

- economic ties and financial implications of the war;
- security considerations and historical ties;
- alleged application of double standards by the West;
- need for keeping a back door open for negotiations.

### *Economic Ties and Financial Implications of the War*

Although at this point it is still largely just an impression, the war in Ukraine comes at a high cost for countries that depend on Official Development Assistance (ODA), particularly those in Africa. Rising food and energy prices in those countries are already jeopardising commitments and progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. As one interlocutor put it: "Your perception of the world is universal, but my problems are not necessarily. My priorities are getting food on the table, climate change and global trade."

With regard to the positioning of Latin American countries, and in particular their lack of support for a sanctions regime against Russia, the twofold dependencies to which they are subject must be taken into account. For them, Russia is not only an important sales market for their agricultural products; they also need Russian fertiliser for their own agro-industries.

While budget allocations in Western countries so far do not indicate any cuts in aid to Africa or other regions, the proportions alone create the feeling among developing countries that their problems have become secondary. The US Congress approved a package of 113 billion US dollars in aid and military assistance to Ukraine and allied nations in 2022.<sup>5</sup> For the African



Further cornering the Russian leader? The arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court against Vladimir Putin is deemed counterproductive by some UN member states. [Photo: © Allison Bailey, NurPhoto, picture alliance.](#)

continent, the Biden administration proposed to Congress an increase in the State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS) budget from 7.65 billion US dollars (2022) to 7.77 billion US dollars in the fiscal year 2023.<sup>6</sup> Another example is the assistance to Mexico in the context of the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (a security partnership that also addresses border and migration management issues). Funding for the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement cooperation remained stable at 64 million US dollars, and the Economic Support Fund was actually increased from 57.8 million US dollars in 2022 to 75 million US dollars in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

The situation in the European context differs, however. From the European Peace Facility, a newly created EU instrument designed to

address security challenges mainly on the African continent, 3.6 billion euros (or 64 per cent) of the 5.6 billion euro allocation for the financial period from 2021 to 2027 have already been dedicated to Ukraine (up to February 2023).<sup>8</sup> Since the start of the war in Ukraine, a total of 698 million euros has been given to the African Union (AU), Niger, Mauritania and the Gulf of Guinea countries, with the largest share going to the AU for its peace and security architecture (600 million euros for the period from 2022 to 2024).

Although EU representatives often profess their support for developing countries in their UNGA speeches, the feeling prevails among permanent representatives that more understanding must be shown for the concerns of others. More outreach and action are needed to enhance food security and to address issues such as debt sustainability for developing countries in an age



of economic and geopolitical turmoil. As one permanent representative noted, “sucking the air out of the UN system by focusing solely on Ukraine is not healthy for Europe. Don’t fix a problem by creating a new one further on.”

## Old and new loyalties of those countries for which Russia is an economic partner prevent them from supporting the West.

### *Security Considerations and Historical Ties*

For countries in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus located in Russia’s immediate vicinity – thus directly affected by Russian power projection –, abstention is the most they can do. For them, abstaining and not voting with Russia, as they might have done in the past (for instance, in regard to the annexation of Crimea), is an act of support for the UN Charter. In the words of an ambassador from the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, “[t]he violation of the UN Charter comes at face value and there is no justification for it.”

African states that either currently receive Russian military support (e.g. Central African Republic and Burkina Faso contracting private mercenaries of the Wagner Group<sup>9</sup>) or whose governments cultivated close ties with the Soviet Union during their own liberation struggles (countries of the South African Development Community, SADC) also prefer to abstain. Old and new loyalties of those countries for which Russia is an economic partner prevent them from supporting the West.

### *Alleged Application of Double Standards by the West*

Most permanent representatives interviewed have criticised the ignorance on the part of the West in relation to other conflicts and its ambivalence towards violations of human rights and international law, as well as the United States’

power projection when it serves its own interest. In the conversations, this was often summarised as “double standards by the West”.

The situation in the Palestinian territories and the silence on Israel’s illegal settlements seems to be a subject of grievance and controversy underestimated by the West. The criticism of the West’s acquiescence appeared in almost every conversation with African and Arab ambassadors. Particularly in the Arab world, it stirs up emotions against the West within societies. But on the multilateral stage, too, it can become an obstacle for the West in achieving policy goals that require broad international support. The Europeans’ hesitancy in adapting their positions on Israel’s settlement policies is seen not only as a point of critique but also as ammunition for Russia and China to accuse Europe of double standards.

In other cases, too, such as Rwanda’s interference in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Turkish power projections in Iraq, Libya and the Caucasus, the West is seen to be turning a blind eye. Many permanent representatives thus highlighted the need for a more even-handed approach by the international community. In addition, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dissolution, within days after the seizure of power by the Taliban, of a state built on a Western model has delegitimised the West in the eyes of interviewees: “Don’t trust the West, they will give up on you.”

### *Need for Keeping a Back Door Open for Negotiations*

Some countries abstained in the voting as they are trying to remain neutral, arguing that they could be of use at a time when both sides might feel that they are ready for peace negotiations: “We will serve when peace comes. Then we can try to help.” Others did not vote with the West if they thought that it might not be helpful for the dialogue with Russia within the UN as a primary space for negotiations. In this regard, the criticism was raised that not a single session on Ukraine in the Security Council has been a

closed session, even though there is an urgent need for a real dialogue behind closed doors. In all meetings with permanent representatives, the need for talks between Ukraine and Russia was reiterated. But they also acknowledged that the time may not yet have come, as parties to the conflict do not seem open to the idea and are still betting on a military win.

## China is the main concern for the US, more so than Russia and its aggression in Ukraine.

However, if the West wants to retain the support of a broad majority, it is expected to pursue a moderate approach and to show initial signs of willingness to negotiate some sort of ceasefire. Representatives also stressed that it might become necessary to start peace negotiations while the war is still ongoing. While Russia is seen as having manoeuvred itself into a precarious position, it was also noted that it will always remain a key player in the international system. Following this point of view, the West should therefore think ahead and weigh up its options, taking into account that Putin is primarily concerned about his legacy, while at the same time considering what a defeated and disintegrating Russia would mean for the West and Eurasia.

### The West's Moral High Ground and Diplomatic Pressure

Similar to the aforementioned “double standards” argument, points were also raised in relation to the diplomatic culture currently prevailing within the United Nations. Permanent representatives emphasised that respectful relations should preclude pressure to align – even if circumstances might seem to make this necessary. Values cannot be projected and instilled by exercising pressure. If pressure becomes too strong, a natural reaction will therefore be to retreat: “Lecturing and calling out states does not work anymore. The West has to learn that they cannot have the influence any longer.

International relations are not a one-way street. There is always the need to make concessions to the other side. There is the need to show respect.” It is also considered disrespectful if a country is discussed in the Security Council and its permanent representative is not allowed into the room but has to beg for information from other Council members.

Most states in Latin America see themselves as part of the West, sharing the same cultural values. But even so, Latin American countries do not want to be in a position in which they have to pick a side. The more pressure is exerted to “choose”, the more likely it becomes that there will be a reaction in the form of withdrawal or rejection. Historically, Latin America has predominantly supported the West, but it is uncertain how long this will continue to be the case: “Europe has to understand that Latin America is an ally of the West but that does not imply that we go along with everything. We draw our own conclusions and weigh up national interests.”

### Systemic Rivalry – Are We Onlookers or Are We Becoming Pawns?

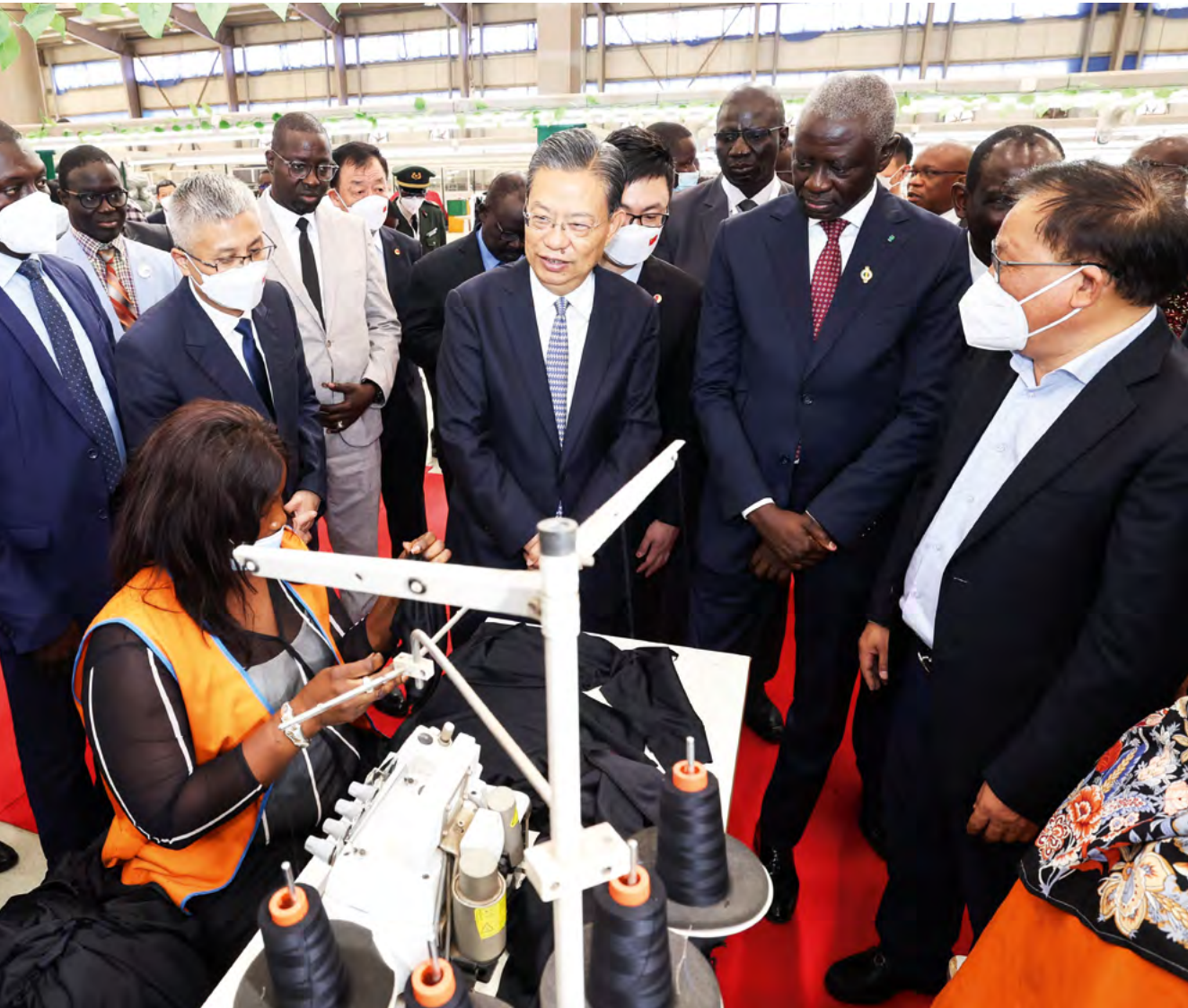
In the systemic rivalry between the West and Russia/China, one concern for some countries is whether they are onlookers or becoming pawns in a geopolitical game of chess. This clearly shows their uneasiness about either getting drawn into one camp or remaining disempowered on the sidelines of history. Within the rivalry and competition between the United States and China, they identify a dangerous trend, an aggressiveness in tone and the push to choose sides. Mass media on both sides are understood as having a catalysing effect in aggravating antagonism. China has been identified as the main concern for the United States, more so than Russia and its aggression in Ukraine. Although seen as a military challenger, it has been argued in the interviews that Russia has never posed a threat to US hegemony, even during the Cold War. As such, the Russian challenge is seen as standing in sharp contrast to China, which competes with the United States on multiple levels.



It is considered to be absolutely imperative for Europe to define its role in the multipolar world and demonstrate a global foreign policy profile. Although people understand why Europe remains steadfast on the side of the United States in the face of the existential threat on its borders, there is a growing perception that Europe is beginning to fight China because of the United States: “Europe needs to be careful and should not make itself an enemy of China.”

### *Perception of China and Its Intentions*

An explanation given for China’s assertiveness and determination to redefine its role on the global stage lies in China’s feeling of being confronted with Western hegemony within the UN system, with the United States interfering with Beijing’s global ambitions. The assumption is that China does not want to remain at the fringes of the international system any longer



Quick delivery on promises: China is increasingly seen as a less cumbersome partner than Western countries by numerous governments in Africa and elsewhere. Infrastructure and industrial projects like this one in Senegal are usually completed swiftly, with local politicians often not caring about the long-term risks of Chinese engagement. Photo: © Pang Xinglei, Xinhua, picture alliance.

and that it is frustrated about not being recognised as it believes it deserves to be. It has thus been concluded that China does not perceive itself as a threat to the international system and wants to be recognised as a power. The United States, however, does not seem ready to grant this recognition.

The threat perception regarding China's ambitions is clearly not shared by all. Moreover, the growing financial dependencies of developing countries on China and the sell-out of their natural resources for generations to the People's Republic was not brought up in the conversations. Instead, its rise to global power is acknowledged by the Global South: "Nobody can stop China from becoming relevant – irrespective of its human rights violations."

For many countries, it is not clear why China's engagement should be rejected outright. Beijing's style and influence-seeking in multilateral institutions was at best described as ambivalent. It was noted that China does not show its strength in the UN ostentatiously but acts in very subtle ways. The projected image of a benevolent actor with "good intentions" is taken with a pinch of salt or, in diplomatic terms, "cautiously accepted but not fully believed."

## China presents itself as a partner to developing countries.

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### *What Global Partners Have to Offer*

China presents itself as a partner to developing countries at the UN level. When developing countries interact with China, they see a partner that delivers quickly on promises, and with no strings attached, and most politicians do not see the long-term costs of Chinese investments for their countries. Particularly for African countries, China is an attractive partner as it not only offers investments but also access to information and communications technology.

Even in Latin America, China is perceived as a less cumbersome partner with whom trade negotiations can take place without burdening issues such as climate change or human rights. Besides the increasing number of Latin American countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the number of Latin American countries formally cutting ties with Taiwan has also increased in the last few years.<sup>10</sup> One argument heard from permanent representatives of all regions has been the question of what the West can offer in addition to or instead of Chinese trade agreements and investments.

In Latin America, there is a feeling that the United States still considers the continent as its almost natural sphere of influence and therefore does not pay enough attention to it. In contrast to Europe, which has come up with a Global Gateway programme as an alternative to the BRI, the United States has not yet presented an initiative of its own to counterbalance the BRI internationally. While the EU might score on infrastructure investments, certainly in Latin America it falls short on trade. The painful and prolonged EU-Mercosur trade agreement negotiations have tainted relations and destroyed trust, as the agreement was seen by Mercosur countries not only as a trade project but also as a political one. When French President Emmanuel Macron blocked the agreement in its final stages due to former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's questionable environmental policies, EU member states were perceived as short-sighted and listening too much to their national pressure groups.

### *The Vacuum the United States Has Left Behind*

Permanent representatives from all regions underlined that the systemic rivalry has not only been fuelled by China's growing regional and global ambitions. It was made possible in the first place by an absent United States and a rather inward-looking Europe. In particular, the United States' disengagement from the world stage during Donald Trump's presidency and the US military repositioning are perceived as

having encouraged others to fill the gap. This could be China, but countries in the Middle East also eye Turkey's regional aspirations with suspicion. The fact that China has become a mediator in the Middle East and facilitated a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is also seen by diplomats as a sign of a changing world order.

### Take-aways and Points for Reflection

- The Western approach to multilateralism uses the concept of a rules-based order that implies accountability. Meanwhile, others primarily value the inclusiveness of multilateral institutions and the opportunity they offer to gather everybody around the table to seek compromises in negotiations. In order to manage expectations, it is necessary to be aware of the underlying tensions between the two approaches.
  - At the same time, it is necessary to dismantle the argument that the rules-based order is a Western concept. The universality of the values enshrined in this order needs to be promoted more effectively, in juxtaposition to Chinese narratives that apply the rule of law exclusively to inter-state relations and not to the state-citizen relationship.<sup>11</sup>
  - If we wish to maintain a global alliance for the principles of the UN Charter, we will have to better address the existential threats that other member states face. On issues such as food security, debt sustainability and reform of the global financial architecture, the West could show developing countries its engagement and support. In Africa, 57 per cent of countries now spend more on interest payments on their public debt (including their loans from China) than on health, 17 per cent spend more on interest payments than on education, and 60 per cent are already in debt distress.<sup>12</sup>
  - It is vital to correct the impression that the United States and Europe have become indifferent to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- The same applies to other conflicts where the West has provided mediation platforms in the past but subsequently abandoned them for various reasons.
- The West must maintain the momentum for international support for Ukraine but will have to mitigate increasing pressure to consider negotiations as an option. If support for Ukraine is coerced through diplomatic pressure, there may be collateral damage along the way.
  - We need to understand that our threat perception in relation to China is not shared by most countries in the Global South. They prefer a pragmatic approach towards China's new role.
  - Even those who share our values do not want to be pressurised into picking sides.
  - Europe has to define its role in the multipolar world and show a more prominent global foreign policy profile. EU relations with Latin America have been on a backburner for over a decade. A once prominent role in the Middle East Peace Process has given way to insignificance. EU-Africa relations have become a cumbersome "tick the box" exercise and need to be reinvigorated with a truly strategic dialogue, whereas in Asia the EU still has to enhance its political clout to match its economic power.
  - Last but not least, we Europeans must recognise that while we try to promote values-based multilateralism, the majority of countries, including the United States, see international relations as transactional, short-term and guided by national interests.

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- 1 UN General Assembly (UNGA) 2023: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 Feb 2023, A/RES/ES-11/6, 2 Mar 2023, in: <https://rb.gy/csluu> [31 May 2023].
- 2 The quote used in the caption of this article is from one of these conversations.
- 3 The G77 group is a coalition of 135 states, mostly developing countries, which was founded in 1964 to strengthen their negotiating power and assert their economic interests. China participates in the group's meetings but does not consider itself a member. Group declarations are therefore made by the G77 plus China.
- 4 In addition, ICC arrest warrants and trials against heads of state have often been ignored (Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was able to travel freely within Africa) or thrown out. The cases against William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta from Kenya had to be dismissed for lack of sufficient evidence.
- 5 Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget 2023: Congress Approved \$113 Billion of Aid to Ukraine in 2022, 5 Jan 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3AjxhXS> [31 May 2023].
- 6 Congressional Research Service 2022: U.S. Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview, 30 Aug 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/3H4G1KN> [31 May 2023].
- 7 Congressional Research Service 2022: U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework, 12 Dec 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43JW9fw> [31 May 2023].
- 8 EU Neighbours East 2023: Ukraine: EU agrees further military support under the European Peace Facility, 2 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/41KdaEA> [31 May 2023].
- 9 Mali's military junta, which called in the Wagner Group for military assistance, even voted with Russia on 23 Feb 2023.
- 10 In the last six years, Panama, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and lately Honduras have abandoned their relations with Taiwan. Only seven Latin American countries now maintain relations with Taiwan: Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
- 11 Ostheimer, Andrea Ellen 2022: The United Nations and Global Multilateral Organisations as a Playground for American-Chinese Rivalry?, in: *New Realities of Multilateralism*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Panorama 1/2022, 14 Nov 2022, pp. 7-26, in: <https://bit.ly/3Wxaglo> [31 May 2023].
- 12 Kyte, Rachel 2023: Comment: Green shoots, but World Bank meeting leaves a mountain to climb on climate finance, Reuters, 19 Apr 2023, in: <https://reut.rs/3LmfGvz> [31 May 2023].



Photo: © P. Architecture/Alamy

[Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!](#)

# Many New Alliances

The Middle East and North Africa in  
the Global “Systemic Rivalry”

Canan Atilgan

There is consensus in the West that the outcome of the war in Ukraine will decide whether authoritarian states such as Russia and China can be countered in their thirst for power so as to defend the rules-based order. Based on this interpretation, the war is seen as part of a global systemic conflict between democracy and autocracy in which the West expects support from the countries of the so-called Global South as well. The reality is quite different, however: the “Global South” is going its own way. This applies to the states of the Middle East and North Africa, too. While they condemn the Russian attack almost without exception, they have a different perspective on what has been called *Zeitenwende* in Germany – and are becoming increasingly estranged from the West.

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### ***Realpolitik* instead of Systemic Conflict**

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Russia is seen as the aggressor in the war in Ukraine, and the Russian attack is considered to be in violation of international law. Voting behaviour in the United Nations General Assembly on the resolutions condemning the Russian invasion clearly indicates the unequivocal stance of the countries in the region. While several countries were still hesitant in the first vote on 2 March 2022, abstaining (Iraq) or not voting (Morocco) due to their own security concerns, they went on to vote against Russia one year later. Syria remains an exception. The country has been in Russia’s clutches since 2015 and has no choice but to follow the dictates from Moscow. Algeria is currently the only country in the region that still abstains on the UN resolutions, thereby remaining true to its traditional positioning as a “non-aligned state”.

Nonetheless, this majority anti-Russian vote does not necessarily mean that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa identify with the Western interpretation of the war in Ukraine. In Arab societies in particular, the Russian view of the situation, based on the narrative of the threat to its own security posed by NATO enlargement, certainly finds resonance.

Moreover, despite the global implications in terms of food and energy security, the war in Ukraine is perceived as a regional European issue that the West should take care of itself. From the point of view of these countries, the war is therefore an expression of a rekindled rivalry for power in Europe. Most countries in the region have other concerns: they are pre-occupied with pressing problems that are largely of a home-grown nature. The greatest current challenges facing Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon do not primarily derive from the Russian attack on Ukraine but from far-reaching structural challenges such as the devastating consequences of the pandemic, state mismanagement and the debt crisis.

These countries are even less prepared to follow the narrative of systemic conflict. In this region, which has always been a stage for geopolitical power games and power shifts, the dynamics of global politics are certainly registered, but from the point of view of *realpolitik*. The relative withdrawal of the United States from the region and the growing presence of China alone are unmistakable indicators of this geopolitical realignment. Yet terms such as systemic rivalry or conflict do not appear in the debate here. Instead, current developments are understood and explained as a “great power competition”



between the West and China or Russia in a security and geopolitical context. According to this view, different powers compete for regional or global influence: the specific underlying notions of political order advocated by these rival powers are irrelevant. The main issue for the Arab countries therefore concerns the consequences of declining US power in view of the security and protection of “small states” and “middle powers” – in other words all the states in the Middle East and North Africa. The question is thus how best to survive the increasing confrontation between the great powers while preserving one’s own national interests and not getting caught up between the fronts.

### **What is happening in the region is the emergence of “development autocracies”.**

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In this respect, what is perceived in the West as systemic rivalry is regarded in the Middle East as a conventional geopolitical struggle for power. According to them, this is not about democracy versus autocracy. The countries of the region are aligning themselves with tangible interests of their own: they do not share the normatively charged approach to the issue. It is an attitude that is fuelled by these countries’ experiences of the West’s moral aspirations in the region. Examples that are cited again and again include the West’s handling of the US invasion of Iraq in violation of international law, the Palestinian question and Israel policy, and Afghanistan. There is a widespread perception in the Arab world that the West only insists on respect for international law and a rules-based order when this has a bearing on the West itself or its interests. These positions can certainly not go unchallenged, but at the same time they must be taken seriously.

On the other hand, the lack of a value dimension in the understanding of the new world order is hardly surprising, given that, in terms of domestic policy, the focus of the entire region

is no longer on systemic rivalry in the sense of democracy versus autocracy. The political transformation processes have long come to a standstill – even in Tunisia, once a country that was a beacon of hope. The notion of stability has proved stronger than the desire for change. Economic regression and social dislocation in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria have given rise to an autocratic or anti-pluralist momentum among citizens and elites because it promises stability, efficiency and modernisation. What is happening in the region is the emergence of “development autocracies”: countries are developing their own models while looking at how things work in other parts of the world. It is not necessarily China or Russia that are considered to be state models, but rather local hegemonies such as the Arab Gulf states that position themselves as middle powers, representing a new system of a functioning welfare state that promises prosperity and progress. One good example of this is Morocco. The kingdom has launched a new development strategy with a detailed plan for reform in the areas of health, education, digitalisation and energy transition. Foreign relations are aligned with these goals and priorities, among other things.

### **Partnership Based on Interests Rather than Values**


The current geopolitical and geo-economic patterns of behaviour in the Middle East and North Africa suggest a fundamental discomfort with the idea of having to choose sides after the Russian attack on Ukraine. Even countries in the Gulf and the Maghreb that are close allies of the West have rebuffed calls to join Western action against Russia. None of the countries in the region is participating in the economic sanctions. Instead, they are all eager to maintain their relations with Russia and with Asian powers such as China and India, just as they are to maintain their relations with Europe and the United States. This in no way means a convergence with Russian or Chinese positions, however: the idea of a new Cold War or a new global polarisation goes against the economic and security interests of most countries in the region.

The Gulf monarchies – led by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – are global energy superpowers. Qatar is one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of natural gas. Doha is currently working on expanding

production capacity by around 60 per cent, which will make the country the world’s largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) by 2027, if not before.<sup>1</sup> The world’s ten largest oil producers include Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.<sup>2</sup>



A key energy supplier: Algeria is Africa’s largest gas exporter and the seventh largest in the world. 83 per cent of Algerian gas exports go to Europe, mainly to Spain and Italy. Photo: © Billal Bensalem, NurPhoto, picture alliance.



Revenues have enabled these states to invest massively in infrastructure, education and health, which has led to rapid economic development and a significant improvement in the quality of life in these countries. The region's most important customers are not the West, however, but China and India. As the energy transition progresses, European demand for fossil fuels will decline roughly in line with the increase in demand in China and India. In view of this, close relations with Asia are vital to the survival of the Gulf states.

The situation is different for Algeria, which is dependent on the European market. Algerian gas reserves amount to almost 2.3 trillion cubic metres: the country is Africa's largest gas exporter and the seventh largest in the world.<sup>3</sup> 83 per cent of Algeria's gas exports go to Europe, mainly Spain and Italy, with which long-term contracts are in place.<sup>4</sup> The Italian energy company ENI and the Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach have now concluded an agreement to increase gas exports. As such, Italy presents itself to Algeria as a new sales market and to the EU as an intermediary in the supply of gas to Central Europe. This new cooperation is not intended to remain a stopgap solution but rather to diversify Italy's and Europe's supply of natural gas in the long term.

### **Tunisia is now pursuing a more nationalist foreign policy.**

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Meanwhile, resource-poor countries such as Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt are confronted with existential crises. These are partly home-grown structural economic challenges, including high levels of unemployment, insufficient diversification of the economy, a high burden of public debt and unstable currencies. They are among the countries with the highest inflation rates worldwide, struggling with social tensions and unable to manage their debt problems without International Monetary Fund (IMF) programmes. In this respect, they are dependent

on economic and development cooperation with the Western-dominated international donor organisations.

In view of this, “non-alignment” or “multi-alignment” is the new mantra in the region. All of the countries are striving to diversify their foreign, security and economic policy relations. They want to keep their options open, so to speak, especially as they are aware that the global order is changing and they have to adapt to the new realities of a multi-polar world which involves multiple actors. The Arab countries are therefore adopting a more independent and much more self-confident foreign policy to pursue their own interests. They are trying to reduce dependencies and realign or expand their network of partnerships. All countries without exception have signed partnership agreements with China under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For most of the countries in the region, Beijing is now the largest trading partner and investor. The countries in the region are investing in Sub-Saharan Africa and opening their markets to others. Nonetheless, the close economic and development partnership with the EU remains equally important.

Morocco, for example, has raised its geopolitical profile in Africa in recent years, entering into alliances with countries in other parts of the world to pursue its foreign policy agenda, especially with Israel and some of the Gulf states, and also cooperating closely with Europe, as well as with China in connection with the BRI. Tunisia is another interesting example. The country is not only a traditional partner to Europe but also heavily dependent on European support. With increasing euroscepticism, however, the country is now pursuing a more nationalist foreign policy while at the same time trying to avoid being caught between its large neighbours Morocco and Algeria. Algeria is the only exception in North Africa in terms of diversification. Algerian foreign policy is heavily influenced by the Western Sahara issue and relations with the West have deteriorated significantly since the United States decided to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

This low point, coupled with the recent rift with France over its colonial past and the simultaneous break with Spain over its new approach to the Western Sahara issue, has led Algiers into unprecedented political isolation from the Western world. This in turn has resulted in Algeria strengthening its political relations with the revisionist powers while reducing its ties with the West.

### **The West may continue to become less attractive and lose more of its influence and room for manoeuvre.**

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Unlike in the Middle East, there is a geopolitical power vacuum in the Maghreb. For the United States, the Maghreb has never been of primary interest. Since the war in Ukraine, Europe's attention has almost completely moved away from the region. Europe currently seems to have neither a vision nor a strategy for its immediate neighbourhood in the south. As a traditional power in the Maghreb, France is struggling to maintain its influence and privileges. China is the only power with an overarching strategy that includes the Maghreb, but even for China the region is not at the centre of its Belt and Road Initiative. Russia benefits from Algeria's isolation, but has little to offer to the countries of the region. The power vacuum is instead being filled by middle powers such as Turkey and the Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They are courting the countries of the region with offers of cooperation and using their financial resources to secure political influence. While Europe is withdrawing from North Africa, regional powers have thus discovered the region as a sphere in which to pursue their economic and political interests.

#### **New Alliances Rather than Old Loyalties**

The geopolitical power hierarchy in the Middle East and North Africa has been in a state of flux for some time – a situation in which the West

has already become less attractive and has lost some of its influence and room for manoeuvre, and it may continue to do so. The withdrawal of the United States from the region is not a new phenomenon, but it has accelerated as a result of the war in Ukraine, further exacerbating the marginalisation of the West and Western institutions. Increasingly, the elites in the Middle East doubt the West's will and capacity to influence the course of conflicts such as those in Syria or Libya, to counteract economic decline in the region or to put a stop to powerful actors such as Russia or Iran with its nuclear ambitions and destabilising activities in the region. They are distancing themselves from traditional power structures and seeking independent solutions to their own challenges.

In recent years, an active neighbourhood policy has emerged in the region in the form of dialogue and collaborative efforts between rival states. Examples of this current policy of détente include the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the normalisation of relations between some Arab countries and Israel, the de-escalation between Egypt and Turkey, efforts to reintegrate Syria with the Assad regime into the Arab world, and Iraq's diplomatic offensive to find a link with its Arab neighbours without triggering a rift with Iran. Both overlapping to some extent but also diverging, these efforts clearly document a new orientation in foreign and security policy outside the previous Western-dominated formats.

This trend is even more clearly reflected in the Saudi-Iranian agreement negotiated in Beijing in early 2023. Under Chinese mediation, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to resume diplomatic relations, which had been severed in 2016. What is more, individual agreements were reached that address each country's security interests and threat perceptions. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is a game changer in several ways. For the first time in the Middle East, a deal has been reached between regional rivals without the involvement of the West. The United States and Europe have failed with their Iran policy so far. It was not possible to renegotiate the nuclear





The news the day after: In March of this year, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement to resume diplomatic relations. The rapprochement between the arch rivals was achieved through China's mediation and could be a game changer in the region in more than one respect. Photo: © Abedin Taherkenareh, epa, picture alliance.

programme, nor could Iranian proxy activities be stopped, because the West had no leverage over Iran and was not able to offer security guarantees to the worried Gulf states. The easing of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran will potentially bring about a fundamental shift in the balance of power in the Middle East, because it also involves a de-escalation of the Shiite-Sunni antagonism that has prevailed in the region over the past decade. The agreement

also puts an end to the narrative that China wants nothing to do with the complex conflicts in the Middle East. China has strategic ambitions in the region and is evidently prepared to take on a more active role in shaping it. With regard to Iran's nuclear aspirations, too, China seems to be the only actor able to influence the mullahs' regime by offering incentives. China definitely does not want a nuclear-capable Iran as this could potentially provoke an Israeli

military strike and endanger the stable conditions in the Gulf, which are important to China.

Economically, China is already an important partner to the Gulf countries: with a bilateral trade volume of 161.4 billion US dollars, it replaced the EU as the largest trading partner in 2020, having invested almost 25 billion US dollars in the region over the past 15 years. Further billion-dollar investments were agreed on at China's first summit with the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 2022.<sup>5</sup> But economics is not the only concern here. At least rhetorically, China and the Gulf monarchies share the vision of a multi-polar world order in which priority is attached to preserving and expanding globalisation and connectivity. When Riyadh and Beijing explore the possibilities of conducting energy trade in currencies other than the US dollar, the positioning is clear. The UAE and China have already launched pilot projects to conduct energy trading directly in digital currencies. These developments should finally dispel any interpretation that relations between China and the Gulf states are exclusively about economic cooperation.

### **The dynamic developments in the immediate neighbourhood seem to have either passed Europe by or are not taken seriously.**

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While China is establishing itself as a new strategic partner in the Gulf, Western rapprochement offensives towards the Gulf monarchies in the wake of the energy crisis following the Russian attack on Ukraine have remained unsuccessful. Not only US President Joe Biden but also French President Emmanuel Macron, the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have all paid demonstrative visits in an attempt to reboot relations with Saudi Arabia – mainly with a view to getting the oil monarchies on their side. But OPEC+ snubbed

the West by deciding to curb oil production entirely in its own economic interest and to raise oil prices. The media commented on this decision as a declaration of independence by Saudi Arabia. In fact, the decision shows that the times when US national interests determined actions in the Gulf monarchies are over.

Clearly, the Gulf states – focusing on their own interests – are looking to contribute to a new global political framework that is not shaped by the West. This intention is confirmed by Saudi Arabia's recent decision to become a “dialogue partner” to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which includes the Central Asian states and Iran, as well as Russia, China, India and Pakistan. For the first time, Saudi Arabia is participating in a multilateral Eastern platform with countries that propagate a counter-model to the Western order.

### **Europe: Pragmatism Rather than Rhetoric**

Geopolitical changes and the West's loss of positional advantages now make it urgently necessary to revise existing policy in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet Europe is finding it difficult to adapt to the new realities in the region, clinging to a “status quo” in relations that has not existed for some time. The dynamic developments in the immediate neighbourhood seem to have either passed Europe by or are not taken seriously, even though every change in the Middle East and North Africa always has an impact on Europe, and Europeans have the best access to this region.

In addition, Europe's attention has moved away from the region in recent years – even more so in the wake of the war in Ukraine. The German government also shows little interest in the neighbourhood to the south. Its dealings are relatively uninspired, limited to continuing cooperation on the issue of migration and expanding cooperation in the areas of climate change and energy transition. Neither strategy nor goals are discernible with regard to the shifting geopolitical framework conditions, even though dependencies on this region are increasing. This

is particularly evident on the issue of migration, while a similar trend can be observed in connection with energy security.

If Europe wants to find long-term and sustainable ways to stay relevant in its own neighbourhood and help shape the future, it must not only offer financial incentives, extensive programmes and diverse initiatives, but also define its own interests. Above all, Europe needs to set a clear agenda, prioritise its goals and be willing to pursue them vigorously. This includes first and foremost the realisation that it is not strategic to offer a “one size fits all” approach, i.e. to attempt to make the same offer of cooperation to all southern neighbouring countries regardless of their needs and capabilities. Rather, the aim must be to identify key partners with whom Europe can jointly assert its interests – if necessary up against other actors.

### **An honest interest in the perspectives of the countries in the region would open up new options for Europe.**

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While it is important to adopt a normative policy approach in dealing with southern neighbours, Europeans should refrain from any moralistic exaggeration of the Western understanding of values and should avoid criticising social, cultural and religious values and moral concepts, which is perceived as disrespectful. This also applies to the narrative of global polarisation in terms of democracies versus autocracies. In a highly geopoliticised region where the focus is on partnerships based on interests rather than values, talk of supposed global systemic rivalry conveys the impression that the primary interest is in containing the influence of Russia and China rather than pursuing genuine partnership.

In view of this, Europe should seriously address the question of how it can become more attractive again in its neighbourhood and strengthen its partnerships there. One promising approach

could be to engage in dialogue regarding common interests that can be jointly pursued even in the absence of shared values. One such common interest is the defence of the international rules-based order: after all, it is the strength of the latter and the protection it offers on which the small and less powerful states of the Middle East and North Africa are particularly dependent.

Likewise, it is important to adopt a more strategic focus in development cooperation, taking into account the needs of the region without losing sight of one’s own economic and foreign policy interests. For the societies of the Arab world, the rule of law, the fight against corruption, transparency and decent treatment of citizens by the authorities are values that are still highly appreciated as European strengths. As such, the European lifestyle and economic approach remain attractive. The Maghreb in particular is a region that still offers great partnership potential for Europe in terms of values, political systems and foreign policy orientation. This is where Europe has the best chance to assert itself as a foreign policy partner and assume greater responsibility in the area of foreign and security policy.

There is also criticism of the current interpretation of the European or Western model combining freedom, democracy and prosperity, although this does not mean that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa automatically share the values of Russia or China. However, it is a clear signal that Europe should take the new self-confidence of the states in the region seriously and factor this into its strategies. A little more sensitivity, a little more openness in dialogue and an honest interest in the perspectives and interests of the countries in the region would open up new options for Europe. Taking the positions of these countries seriously does not mean adopting them: it means strengthening the basis so as to be able to put forward one’s own European view of things with greater credibility.

The war in Ukraine and the growing rivalry between China and the United States have led to

enormous geopolitical complexity in the Middle East and North Africa. For some of the stronger middle powers, such as the resource-rich Gulf states, this phase of global reordering affords new opportunities: they can cooperate with their neighbours, participate in reshaping the rules of the international system and catch up with the dynamic economies of Asia, thereby driving their own transformation. Many small states are more vulnerable than ever, however. They have a limited capacity to manage economic and social crises and to contain conflict. They cannot take sides in the escalating confrontation between the West and Russia. They are distancing themselves from the previous world order and looking for independent solutions. In doing so, they turn their eyes, among others, towards Europe.

*- translated from German -*

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[Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!](#)

# A Laboratory of Systemic Rivalry

The South Caucasus between Russia and the European Union

Stephan Malerius

The systemic rivalry between Russia and the EU plays a central role in the South Caucasus. Moscow regards the region as an exclusive zone of influence, while Brussels formulates offers of cooperation. The states of the South Caucasus act differently in this area of tension – also because the room for manoeuvre varies from country to country.

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### **Sphere of Influence versus Eastern Partnership**

One of the descriptions often applied to the war in Ukraine is that it is an expression of the systemic conflict between Russia and the West, in particular the European Union. It can be regarded as an escalation of systemic rivalry in the post-Soviet space. A normative and differentiated approach is seldom adopted when considering this rivalry, but given that it manifests itself in very different ways in the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union, such an approach would seem expedient. Each of the three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan – has a different perspective on Russia and the European Union – although it is well understood that these two actors stand for two different systems on which it is possible but not obligatory to adopt a position.

The EU is perceived in the South Caucasus both as an economic bloc – sales market, investor, promoter of innovation – and as a union of values that stands for peaceful coexistence, free and fair elections, respect for human rights and good governance. Russia, on the other hand, is seen primarily as being rich in resources, whereby oil and gas can also be used for political leverage at any time. Georgia, for example, experienced this in 2006, long before the West understood that Russia was prepared to weaponise energy too.<sup>1</sup> In Russia, at least since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, there has been no significant attempt to develop a values-based model of the state. A system has gradually emerged that has increasingly embodied a counter-model to the EU: foreign policy is

aggressive and militaristic, elections are rigged, human rights are violated, and the government is based on endemic corruption.<sup>2</sup>

In the countries of the South Caucasus, the systemic antagonism between Russia and the EU determines both political and public discourse. It is supplemented with very varied relationship patterns: for Russia, the region – like the entire post-Soviet space – belongs to its exclusive zone of influence, also referred to as “near abroad”. Russia observes the involvement of other actors such as the EU with suspicion, regarding this as interference in quasi-internal affairs. By contrast, the EU regards the region first and foremost from a geographical perspective, viewing the South Caucasus as a part of Europe and as the EU’s eastern neighbourhood. Political and economic relations with the countries of the region are to be shaped accordingly. In principle – and unlike the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, for example – they have the right to join the EU under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU/Lisbon Treaty).<sup>3</sup> While Russia thinks in terms of spheres of influence and lays claim to power in the region, the EU formulates offers of cooperation – usually conditioned – and the states concerned are free to decide for themselves whether they actually want to join the EU or whether and to what extent they wish to move closer to it.

### **System Formation in the South Caucasus**

Before considering the positioning of the countries of the South Caucasus in relation to the systemic rivalry between Russia and the EU, we first have to look at the systems that emerged

in the states themselves after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence in the early 1990s. After this, wars broke out in the region: between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (1992 to 1994) and a civil war in Georgia between the central power in Tbilisi and a breakaway part of the country: Abkhazia (1992 to 1993). These wars became frozen conflicts with de facto independent territories that were not recognised internationally.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by very difficult and painful transformation processes, especially in the 1990s, which developed in very different ways in each of the three states.

## **There are no free elections in Azerbaijan today, but numerous political prisoners.**

### *Armenia*

In Armenia, the 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a process of democratisation that was by no means straightforward. The constitution, adopted in 1995, initially provided for a presidential system, as is predominantly the case in the post-Soviet space, establishing a comparatively weak parliament and a president with far-reaching powers. While presidential power was exercised by different individuals, indicating a certain degree of political competition, freedom of the media and assembly were restricted, while elections were accompanied by irregularities and followed by protests, some of which were violently suppressed. After an initial constitutional reform in 2005 had established the introduction of a semi-parliamentary system, a second controversial constitutional reform in December 2015 completed the shift of power from president to parliament. This had been pursued by the ruling party primarily to preserve political power – as prime minister – for the then President Serzh Sargsyan, who was not allowed to run again after two terms in office. This was followed in 2018 by peaceful mass

protests and the so-called Velvet Revolution led by Nikol Pashinyan. Having become prime minister through democratic elections, Pashinyan set himself the goal of advancing constitutional reforms, fighting corruption and deepening relations with the European Union. With the war against Azerbaijan lost in 2020, he was under massive domestic pressure and called early parliamentary elections to gain new legitimacy. Elections that were deemed free and fair gave Pashinyan the mandate to continue the reforms he had begun.

### *Azerbaijan*

The first democratically elected president of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey, was overthrown in a military coup in 1993 after the country had lost the first war against Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Since then, Azerbaijan has been governed by an authoritarian regime. The second president was Heydar Aliyev, who came from the Soviet elite.<sup>5</sup> After his death in 2003, his son Ilham Aliyev succeeded him, cementing his family's control over the resource-rich country. The two-term limit on the presidency was abolished by referendum in 2009. Aliyev's wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, became vice president in 2017. Several democracy indices describe the system in Azerbaijan as authoritarian and based on corruption. There are no free elections, but numerous political prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

### *Georgia*

Georgia suffered the most severe economic collapse of all Soviet republics after the demise of the Soviet Union. Sales markets collapsed, large combines were shut down and the country descended into a civil war between rival parties and mafia-like clans. Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was also overthrown in a coup in early 1992. His successor, former Georgian Communist Party (CP) leader and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, consolidated Georgia's statehood and introduced democratic reforms, but he failed to curb endemic corruption and rampant violence. In November 2003, Shevardnadze was ousted from office

by the peaceful Rose Revolution. He was succeeded by Mikheil Saakashvili, who consistently oriented the country towards the West up until 2012. Though he became increasingly authoritarian towards the end of his second term, Saakashvili was nevertheless the first president in the South Caucasus to peacefully relinquish power after an electoral defeat. With the new constitution that came into force in 2013, Georgia – like Armenia two years later – made the transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system. Georgian Dream, the party which has been in power since 2012, initially continued on a course geared towards EU integration. In recent months in particular, however, it can be observed that the government – controlled by an oligarch who made his fortune in Russia – is trying to initiate a gradual and subtle repositioning of Georgia that would tie the country more closely to Russia.

## Europe's Interest and the Emerging Systemic Rivalry with Russia

There was no systemic rivalry in the South Caucasus in the 1990s and early 2000s, as the European Union was practically absent from the region and mainly preoccupied with the integration of the countries of Central-Eastern Europe. Conflicts did arise between Russia and the recently independent states of the South Caucasus, however, as the former set up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in an attempt to create a new integration model, once again dominated by Moscow, to replace the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan left the CIS in October 1992. After the fall of Elchibey, who was considered critical of Russia, it re-joined in September 1993. The civil war between the Georgian central government and Abkhazia, and later in other parts of the country, can also be seen as an



Increased interest: The establishment of the Eastern Partnership in May 2009 at a summit in Prague was an expression of a more ambitious EU policy towards Eastern Europe. [Photo: © Srdjan Suki, epa, picture alliance.](#)

attempt by Russia to regain de facto control over Georgia, which had gained independence two years earlier.<sup>7</sup>

Political tensions between Europe and Russia gradually developed in the region from the mid-2000s onwards. One of the reasons for this was that after the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004, eight out of the ten new members were formerly communist, and three even post-Soviet successor states. Understandably, there was a high level of interest in, and attention to, the EU's new eastern neighbours among these member states, and Poland was the driving force behind a programme launched at an EU Summit in Prague in 2009 that set out to establish a policy framework for shaping relations with the EU's eastern neighbours – Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and the countries of the South Caucasus.

### **Historically, the region has always regarded itself as a point of confluence between Europe and Asia, both geographically and culturally.**

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Through its Eastern Partnership initiative, the EU originally sought to create a common space of shared values, democracy, prosperity, stability and enhanced cooperation. At the same time, the programme marked the beginning of a deep-seated systemic rivalry in the region. Europe now had a presence there, expressing interest and formulating policy offers. By contrast, Russia had never stopped thinking in terms of spheres of influence and began to become increasingly autocratic under Putin. For the South Caucasus, this meant that the countries suddenly found themselves faced with the challenge of adopting a position vis-à-vis these differing systems. At the outset, the very far-reaching association agreements that the EU was offering the partner countries were a core component of the Eastern Partnership: one of its aims here was to establish closer

political dialogue and more in-depth cooperation on issues such as the rule of law and security. Initially, consideration was indeed given to how Russia could be involved in the programme, which underlines that the Eastern Partnership sought to achieve cooperation rather than competition.<sup>8</sup> The EU did not succeed in communicating this to the Russian side, however, and Russia was probably not willing to understand this either.<sup>9</sup>

When the Eastern Partnership initiative began, if not before, it seemed as if Russia saw itself as being challenged to create a competing integration model. In 2011, therefore, Putin presented the idea of a Eurasian Union, which would have a clear economic focus but would also provide for free border traffic as in the Schengen area and even envisaged a partnership with the EU.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, this developed into the model of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which did in fact primarily seek to advance economic integration among its members (facilitating the exchange of goods, capital, services and labour) and did not define itself as a community of values. Officially, the EEU was founded by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in May 2014 – five years after the Eastern Partnership and only a few weeks after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Armenia joined the EEU in January 2015.

### **The South Caucasus between the European Union and the Eurasian Union**

It seems like an irony of history that it is precisely the countries of the South Caucasus that today can once again choose between a European and a Eurasian integration model. Historically, the region has always regarded itself as a point of confluence between Europe and Asia, both geographically and culturally. But never has geographical orientation been so clearly linked to the question of opting for one particular system as it is today. As the writer Lasha Bugadze puts it from the Georgian perspective: “The EU basically asked us to state clearly where we are and who we are before we can take our relations to the next stage. This question needs to be answered not just for Europe's, but for our own sake.”<sup>11</sup>

The countries of the South Caucasus have reacted and continue to respond differently to the two models of integration, which at the same time manifest the systemic rivalry between Russia and Europe in the region.

Armenia is the most vulnerable country in the South Caucasus: lacking significant natural

resources and having been in conflict with two of its four neighbours (Turkey, Azerbaijan) for decades, it was an existential question for Armenia to choose Russia as a protective power. Dependent on Russia both in terms of security policy and economically, Armenia nonetheless avoided aligning itself in any other way with the authoritarian model of state that was emerging



in Russia. And so, from 2009 onwards the association agreement with the EU was negotiated, which was seen as an opportunity to strengthen the rule of law in Armenia, for example. After four years of negotiations that were certainly constructive, it was assumed in Brussels that Armenia would sign the agreement at the summit in Vilnius in November 2013. However, to

the surprise of many – not least in Armenia itself – the government in Yerevan declared in late summer that it wished to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. This decision, which also became famous as the “U-turn”, was preceded by a visit by the then Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to Moscow, during which President Putin presumably told him in no uncertain terms that Armenia had no choice but to become a member of the EEU. As a result, Armenia was stuck with the stigma of being “Russia’s ally”, as the country belonged not only to the EEU but also to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance likewise dominated by Russia. Domestically, on the other hand, Armenia was undeterred in its orientation towards the EU, with which Sargsyan negotiated a new agreement on comprehensive and enhanced cooperation from December 2015 onwards, with implementation being pursued since 2021.<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister Pashinyan, who has been in office since 2018, emphasises that democratic reforms and the strengthening of the rule of law are the core strategy of his government – further evidence of Armenia’s balancing act between values-based policies and geopolitical orientation.<sup>13</sup>



### **Russia did not provide Armenia with assistance during the war in 2020 or when the country was attacked by Azerbaijan in autumn 2022.**

Having lost the war and facing an ongoing threat from Azerbaijan, Pashinyan says that the people want to know from his government what security guarantees a democratic system entails.

Heading westwards: In spring of 2023, many people in the Georgian capital Tbilisi took to the streets against a Russian-style “agents law” introduced by the government, and for the country’s further rapprochement with the EU.  
Photo: © David Mdzinarishvili, AA, picture alliance.

According to foreign policy circles, Armenia cannot afford to exist in a security policy vacuum. For this reason, and because the EU is unable to provide security guarantees, the country remains dependent on Russia.<sup>14</sup> But having lasted for more than 30 years, this dependency now appears to be shifting: since Russia did not provide Armenia with military or diplomatic assistance during either the 44-day war in 2020 or when it was attacked by Azerbaijan in autumn 2022, trust in its protective power has dwindled. Instead, the EU has been running a civilian observer mission on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border since November 2022, initially for two months, and since February 2023 on a longer-term basis, with the aim of building trust and improving the security of the people in the conflict region. Russia condemns the mission as clearly geopolitically motivated.<sup>15</sup>

### Among young people in particular, the European model holds much greater appeal.

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For Azerbaijan, the issue of this systemic rivalry in the South Caucasus arose in a different way. After Heydar Aliyev's coup and the installation and consolidation of an authoritarian regime, the country opted early on for a system that had to be modified only slightly in the 30 years of independence, not least because Azerbaijan was economically independent due to its rich gas and oil deposits. For the same reason, it became an attractive business partner for Europe. At the same time, the government in Baku had no interest in a rapprochement with the EU as a union of values, and offers such as the negotiation of an association agreement were not taken up. Relations between Azerbaijan and the EU are asymmetrical. While Baku is predominantly driven by economic interests, Brussels also attempts to bring up issues such as good governance. This does not mean that Azerbaijan has excellent relations with Russia, however, even though there are obvious similarities between the two systems of government.

Russia is perceived as an ally of the arch enemy Armenia, and the bloody suppression of the Azerbaijani democracy movement by Russian troops in the early 1990s is deeply embedded in people's consciousness. The presence of Russian "peacekeepers" on Azerbaijani territory to secure the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed in 2020 is also regarded as a problem. In the conflict between Russia and Europe, or between the two models of integration, Azerbaijan thus strives to maintain an equidistance. The country's closest relations are with Turkey, which in recent years has emerged as a key player in the South Caucasus without being involved in any explicit systemic rivalry with Russia or the EU.

Within the South Caucasus, Georgia is the country that has positioned itself most clearly. The central goal of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency (2004 to 2012) was the sustainable disassociation of Georgia from Russia's sphere of influence and its consistent Euro-Atlantic orientation. In 2008, the country applied to join NATO together with Ukraine, and from 2009 on negotiations were held with the EU on an association agreement: the latter was signed in 2014 together with those of Moldova and Ukraine, with Georgia being the country to make the most progress in terms of implementation for a long time. Euro-Atlantic integration has been enshrined in the Georgian constitution since 2016. Like Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia applied for EU membership in March 2022. The events of March 2023 show how sharply the systemic rivalry between Russia and the EU is perceived in Georgia: in the preceding months, the government took numerous decisions that raised serious doubts as to whether it wanted to stay on track with the country's EU integration, despite statements to that effect. Then the government tried to push a "foreign agents" law through parliament that was obviously inspired by a Russian law silencing all voices critical of the government in Russia from 2012 onwards. After massive protests in the capital, dominated by slogans such as "No to Russian law", "No more Russia" and "We are Europe", the government had to withdraw the legislation. While



European institutions had criticised the introduction of the law, the Russian government criticised its withdrawal.

## Conclusion

Ever since the EU began to express its interest in the South Caucasus through its Eastern Partnership initiative and the association or partnership agreements embedded in it, there has been systemic rivalry in the region with Russia, which regards the post-Soviet space as its exclusive zone of influence. The states of the region have adopted differing positions vis-à-vis the two integration models formulated by the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union, but among young people in particular – as shown by the protests against the “foreign agents” law in Georgia and by surveys conducted in Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>16</sup> – the European model holds much greater appeal. While Russia is mainly seen as a threat, most people associate Europe with good education, economic opportunities and the right to self-determination. The EU tries to meet these expectations by providing wide-ranging offers of cooperation – from Erasmus+ to extensive free trade agreements. However, it remains to be seen whether Europe can become a serious player in terms of security policy too – which is what Georgia and Armenia in particular would like to see. The further development of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan will show, among other things, how far-reaching Europe’s influence in the South Caucasus can actually be.

*– translated from German –*

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- 1 Back in January 2006, Russia interrupted gas supplies to Georgia, allegedly due to explosions on the gas pipelines, which the Georgian government interpreted as an attempt at political blackmail. Paton Walsh, Nick 2006: Georgian leader attacks Russia after gas blasts, *The Guardian*, 23 Jan 2006, in: <https://bit.ly/42B3k9a> [3 May 2023]. Georgia then made efforts to become independent of Russian gas.
- 2 “Russia’s political system gained its first as yet unclear profile in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency [...] It transformed into a strictly ‘managed democracy’ under the presidencies of Vladimir Putin [...] As this term – coined by a Russian publicist – suggests, constitutional principles have been bent and democratic institutions and procedures manipulated.” Mommsen, Margareta 2018: *Russland*, Federal Agency for Civic Education, in: <https://bpb.de/47933> [22 May 2023].
- 3 “Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.” EU Treaty, Article 49, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202/43, in: <https://bit.ly/3WzYbM5> [3 May 2023].
- 4 There was a second war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, which significantly changed the status quo in the region and also impacts directly on the systemic rivalry between Russia and the EU there.
- 5 Heydar Aliyev was First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, a member of the Politburo of the CPSU from 1982 to 1987 and First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Union.
- 6 “Power in Azerbaijan’s authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution.” *Freedom House 2023: Azerbaijan, Freedom in the World 2023*, in: <https://bit.ly/3lssJ4w> [3 May 2023].
- 7 The thoughts of Gela Charkviani during Boris Yeltsin’s visit to Tbilisi in early 1994 are especially noteworthy in this context. Charkviani was a close adviser to Shevardnadze: “Moscow does not want to accept the loss of the empire and its power. This is why Russia is trying to gain new influence and station its troops in countries like Georgia [...] But that is an anachronism. Today it is no longer about prestige politics, troops and military power, but about economic cooperation, from which all countries in the Caucasus ought to benefit, not only Russia.” Nielsen, Fred 2000: *Wind, der weht. Georgien im Wandel*, Frankfurt am Main, p.190.

- 8 “Both Russia and some EU member states raised the question of Russia’s precise role in the Eastern Partnership. EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* (February 5, 2009) that Russia had not been included in the Eastern Partnership because it had decided to remain outside the ENP framework. However, she left open the question of Russian participation on certain issues. Most EU members with a strong interest in the Eastern Partnership, such as Poland and Germany, advocate including Russia in specific projects. France even favours inviting Russia to important summit meetings held in connection with the initiative.” Stewart, Susan 2009: *Russia and the Eastern Partnership. Loud Criticism, Quiet Interest in Cooperation*, SWP Comment 2009/C 07, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 15 May 2009, p.2, in: <https://bit.ly/42UY1A5> [22 May 2023].
- 9 “Other commentaries from the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed the initiative was forcing the countries involved to choose between the EU and Russia. [...] Another member of the Duma, Sergei Markov, described the initiative as hindering ‘strategic cooperation’ between Russia and the countries scheduled to participate in the Eastern Partnership.” *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 10 Halbach, Uwe 2012: *Vladimir Putin’s Eurasian Union. A New Integration Project for the CIS Region?*, SWP Comment 2012/C 01, SWP, 11 Jan 2012, in: <https://bit.ly/4376tgQ> [22 May 2023].
- 11 Lomsadze, Giorgi 2022: *As Georgia imagines its European future, it looks at its past*, Eurasianet, 1 Aug 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/420VV2v> [3 May 2023].
- 12 *The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA)*.
- 13 “He made clear that he would pursue a democratic system, but he ‘also said that he viewed democracy as a firm belief, rather than a geopolitical orientation’.” Remler, Philip 2020: *Russia’s Stony Path in the South Caucasus*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Oct 2020, p.11, in: <https://bit.ly/4082WO4> [3 May 2023].
- 14 Conversation between the author and a representative of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Armenian National Assembly.
- 15 “Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin told EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus [...] that Moscow views the mission as a bid to ‘squeeze Russia out of the region and weaken its historical role as the main guarantor of security’.” Mgdesyian, Arshaluis 2023: *EU launches observer mission in Armenia*, Eurasianet, 23 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/40wuqN9> [3 May 2023].
- 16 In a survey of young people in Azerbaijan, when asked which alliance the country should join, 61 per cent chose the EU and only 3.3 per cent the Eurasian Economic Union. Fabbro, Robin 2023: *How Azerbaijan’s youth feels towards different countries and the conflict*, Open Caucasus Media, 9 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3NA9eT5> [3 May 2023].



Photo: © Kabir Jhangiani, NurPhoto, picture alliance.

भारत 2023 INDIA

Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!

# What Colour Is the Lotus?

India Chooses Not to See a Systemic Conflict

Lewe Paul

In United Nations votes on Russia’s war against Ukraine, the “world’s largest democracy” regularly abstains, as India continues to cultivate relations with Moscow. Appeals to morality will do nothing to change this. If the Western states want to create stronger ties with India, they must make the country concrete offers that support its economic development and increase its security vis-à-vis China.

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For its G20 presidency logo, India designed a striking lotus flower on which a globe appears to be balanced. The symbol is not only a reference to the emblem of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); it is also suggestive of India’s self-image as a global player: one particular feature of the lotus plant, as an Indian diplomat in Berlin explained, is its ability to thrive and flower under adverse conditions.

On the one hand, it is certainly permissible to interpret this symbolism as Modi’s desire to ensure that the major diplomatic events led by his country help the world get back on track in turbulent times. Even more clearly, however, the design of the flower indicates how New Delhi sees itself. With Pakistan to the west and China to the north, India faces two adversaries and a multitude of other problems in South Asia – often described as the world’s least integrated region. The lotus blossom represents India’s declared ambition to emerge from this unfavourable situation to become the prosperous major power that it already ought to be, at least based on its demographics. The orientation of the globe in the logo should not be overlooked, either: just as India lies at the centre, with the South Pole pointing upwards, New Delhi is likewise using its presidency to position itself as the voice and leader of the so-called Global South.

With the fronts becoming entrenched in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and political confrontation intensifying between democratic and authoritarian systems, the West would like to be able to count on India as a solid

partner. India’s voting behaviour in the United Nations has painted a somewhat different picture, however. Despite mounting pressure from Washington, London and Berlin, instead of using resolution A/RES/ES-11/1<sup>1</sup> of 2 March 2022 and subsequent votes to join 141 countries in condemning Moscow’s actions, New Delhi abstained. Even though this voting behaviour has prompted widespread criticism, India is more important than ever as a partner: it has overtaken China as the world’s most populous country, has set itself extremely ambitious economic goals and will be crucial to any attempt to slow down global warming.

India is aware of its relevance in tackling global challenges. Its interests with regard to the world order differ from those of Germany and other representatives of the political West, however. While the term “systemic conflict” is becoming more and more established as a concept in Europe, with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine regarded as one of its symptoms, a sober analysis prevails in India, guided above all by one question: what nutrients does the lotus need to develop its magnificent flower, how can these best be obtained, and who is getting in the way of this endeavour?

### **Independent, Non-aligned and Stubborn**

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has had a tradition of non-alignment in foreign policy. Even in the early days of the Cold War, it was one of the countries seeking to counteract a polarisation of the world order. In 1961, the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was

one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, which was joined by 120 countries. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the importance of the group was relativised, but it continued to be associated with the self-image of an emerging and independent “Global South”: its members refuse to be reduced to the status of pawns in conflicts between the major powers.

## The Indian Armed Forces are dependent on Russian armaments.

In line with this foreign policy tradition, the concerns of the “Global South” are the central mantra of India’s G20 presidency this year too. While political and economic heavyweights such as the United States, Japan and Germany are keen to use the forum to put pressure on Russia or at least formulate a clear stance against Moscow’s war of aggression, India has a different view of its role as host. The G20 should not “allow issues that we cannot resolve together to come in the way of those we can”, Prime Minister Modi noted in an address at the Foreign Ministers’ meeting on 2 March 2023. Instead, he said, a constructive exchange was needed on challenges such as disaster resilience, financial stability, cross-border crime, and food and energy security.<sup>2</sup> Modi appealed to the group’s responsibility towards those countries in particular for which these issues are of existential importance, but which do not have the privilege of sitting at the table for the G20 meetings.

Despite the Indian prime minister’s admonition, the chief diplomats – like the finance ministers at their meeting in Bangalore earlier – were unable to agree on a final declaration because of their diverging views of the war in Ukraine. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock did make use of her intervention to call on her counterpart Sergei Lavrov to have Russian troops withdrawn from Ukraine immediately. The following day, however, the latter was given the opportunity

to present Moscow’s view of things in all its detail and absurdity at a well-attended panel discussion at the Raisina Dialogue – India’s most important security policy gathering.

### India’s Stance on the Russian War of Aggression

By abstaining from the relevant UN resolutions and even offering Russia a platform in its own country, New Delhi is clearly conveying that it does not want to block its access to Moscow. There are several explanations for this. The most obvious is probably the far-reaching dependence of the Indian Armed Forces on Russian armaments. According to an analysis by Institut Montaigne, about 90 per cent of the Indian army’s equipment is produced in Russia, including a large number of T-90 and T-72 tanks and various missile systems. For the air force, the share is around 70 per cent, while the navy has the lowest level of unilateral dependence at around 40 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of political will and given the size of the Indian Armed Forces, the amount of equipment and the maintenance involved, it would be a generational task to break or even significantly reduce this dependence.

Another explanation lies in the economic opportunities created by the West’s move away from Russia’s raw materials. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India’s import of discounted crude oil from Russia increased hugely, with the result that by the beginning of 2023 India was buying about as much as China<sup>4</sup> – a massive rise, even though India recently declared its intention to comply with the price cap imposed by the EU.<sup>5</sup> In the spirit of non-alignment, from India’s point of view, its own economic interests have clear priority over closing ranks with the political camp that is trying to isolate Russia by using sanctions and that regards itself as a global champion of democracy. A third factor that is occasionally brought into play by the BJP government and Indian security experts to allay criticism is the possibility of India taking on a mediating role. According to this narrative, Modi is one of the few heads of government who could possibly still exert influence on the

Russian President Vladimir Putin and would be prepared to act as a mediator if the parties to the conflict so wished.

## In India, the majority view is that China is and will remain an expansionist power.

Perhaps the most important motivation for India's approach to Russia, however, is the scenario of a longer-term shift in power politics. New Delhi looks on with some concern at the deepening and publicly celebrated friendship between Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. India has maintained good relations with the Soviet Union and Russia for decades, but it has long regarded the People's Republic of China as an adversary.<sup>6</sup> For India, it would be a nightmare if an alliance between the world's two major autocracies were to be consolidated north of the subcontinent.

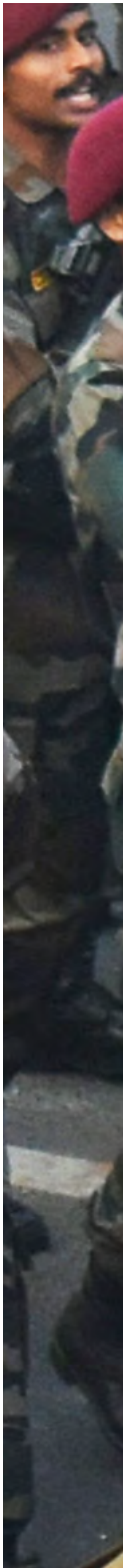
To illustrate this, one only has to imagine an escalation between Indian and Chinese troops in a border region. What would happen if, in the event of a conflict, India had to fend off China's troops for a prolonged period of time and was in urgent need of supplies of weapons, ammunition and maintenance from Russia? Given China's dominance in the Sino-Russian relationship, China would presumably have little problem in cutting off supplies to India. There is no short-term substitute for the equipment from Russia, and as things currently stand it is not apparent that India would be willing or able to rely on any other security guarantee – such as that of Western partners. Faced with the risk of being unable to defend itself, New Delhi therefore feels compelled to at least maintain a good basis of communication with Russia, thereby loosening the ties between the autocrats again, at least in the medium to long term. If, on the other hand, India were to bet everything on an alliance with the West, this would only be a greater incentive for Beijing and Moscow to deepen their friendship.

## India, China and the Rivalry of Civilisations

India and China have a long history of mutual respect. But this only ever lasted as long as the vast expanse of the Himalayas and Tibet formed an almost insurmountable natural border between them. According to Indian security experts, the effectiveness of this buffer zone has diminished considerably over the past century: for decades, India has felt its northern neighbour increasing the pressure along the border. While the West puzzled for a long time about the direction in which China would develop after its opening in the 1980s, India has for some time had a firmly entrenched majority view: it sees China as an expansionist power and does not believe this will change. India's strategic thinking simply left no room for the possibility of any kind of democratisation process happening in China. Asked about the scenario of a protracted systemic conflict, one Indian economist replied without much hesitation that it was not merely a conflict between political systems, but a rivalry of civilisations. China, he says, is a state based on completely different values and whose ideas for the future of humanity are incompatible with the way of thinking and norms that prevail in the West.

Guided by this analysis, China has increasingly become the undisputed priority of Indian foreign policy. Even the arch enemy Pakistan is increasingly becoming less of a focus, even though the conflict over Kashmir is anything but settled and harsh rhetoric against the Muslim neighbouring country prevails, especially within the BJP. Despite these simmering animosities, Pakistan no longer carries the same foreign policy weight for India as it did a few years ago. On the one hand, the country is weakened by a severe political and economic crisis and cannot risk any escalation. Secondly, the fact that Pakistan's economic weakness goes hand in hand with a particularly pronounced dependence on China ultimately leads back to the strategic priority mentioned above.

From its longstanding experience of dealing with China, New Delhi has drawn the lesson of not conducting bilateral disputes in public.





Security first: Against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian rivalry, equipping the military plays an important role for New Delhi. The central supplier of armaments is Russia. Photo: © Sudipta Das, Pacific Press, picture alliance.

“Everything we do takes place behind closed doors,” says political scientist Primit Pal Chaudhuri, a member of India’s National Security Advisory Board, summarising his government’s approach. For a constructive outcome, it is essential to keep an “emergency exit” open for Beijing, he says, adding that as soon as China saw itself trapped in a corner and this became visible to others, it would be unable to make any concessions due to its authoritarian structures. According to Chaudhuri, this would be likely to trigger a conflict. One insight closely related to this is the primacy of physical superiority that prevails in Beijing, or to put it simply: “China only understands the language of power.”<sup>7</sup>

This view is also upheld by the conflicts that flare up again and again along the approximately 3,500-kilometre Sino-Indian border. Driven by various territorial claims, for example in Indian-controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir and of Arunachal Pradesh, this is how China is testing India’s military strength and political resolve. Even though many conflicts are fought far removed from the public eye, Chaudhuri explains, New Delhi has long been committed to a policy of “hard reciprocity” in order to prevent China from developing an appetite for larger-scale confrontation.

## New Delhi needs the Quad in order to gain a geostrategic advantage for itself.

Seeing itself as being firmly anchored in the international rules-based order, India maintains an extremely sceptical attitude towards China’s compliance with treaties. If you enter into an agreement with China, Indian experts warn, this should be understood as a snapshot of the balance of power between China and its respective partner. But if there is any shift in circumstances, they say, China should not be expected to adhere to an agreement: from Beijing’s point of view, the law of the strongest always applies in the end. Since the People’s Republic primarily

seeks to play this trump card against inferior states, counterbalancing Chinese influence in international organisations is an important component of India’s foreign policy. For this reason, delegations from New Delhi and Beijing can be found together at the negotiating tables in forums such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS group.

Given that China is the driving force in the AIIB, one might expect a defensive position on India’s part. But since India is the largest recipient of AIIB loans to date, New Delhi never tires of emphasising the bank’s multilateral character. Before the friendship between Xi and Putin took on its current form, India joined the SCO in 2017 at Russia’s suggestion, after which Beijing arranged for Pakistan to join in the same year. It is likely that this line-up will only allow for agreements at a modest level. From India’s perspective, it is a relief for the Central Asian SCO members today that they are not exclusively pressurised by Russia and China in this forum.

India’s position on BRICS is also a calculated one. The emerging economies format comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa has produced some specialised exchange forums at a working level, but it has not recently been conspicuous for initiating pioneering collaborative ventures. According to Primit Chaudhuri, however, BRICS does offer one particular advantage: for the Chinese public, the quintet has an exclusive and aspirational aura, and the prestigious summits are well received in the Chinese media. For Indian security experts, this relatively superficial rapprochement is certainly significant, because in their view, any positive perception of India in China – however limited – contributes to making Chinese aggression against India less likely.

## The Quad Is Where “De-risking” Takes on Concrete Form

Forums such as these allow India to observe China’s actions and to some extent even influence jointly held discussions. The country is also



making its voice heard as a regional power and a counterweight to autocratic China. In order to gain a geostrategic advantage for itself, however, New Delhi primarily needs the Quad (Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue). After falling behind for several years, this alliance between Australia, India, Japan and the United States gathered fresh momentum on the sidelines of the 2017 summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In order to preserve its foreign policy independence and not confront China directly, India did reject US efforts to enter into a military alliance. Nevertheless, the four members agreed to work together towards a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and a “rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas”,<sup>8</sup> sending out a clear signal against China’s territorial claims and its undermining of the Law of the Sea.

On the face of it, the Quad has limited scope for action. It is neither formalised by treaties nor does it have a secretariat or binding decision-making channels. On closer inspection, however, its flexible dialogue structure turns out to be more of an advantage. Since its revival, the Quad’s summit meetings involving heads of state and foreign ministers have become more frequent, demonstrating genuine shared strategic interests. The recently approved investment by the Taiwanese company Foxconn in the Indian state of Karnataka is a good illustration of this: by 2025, a new plant worth one billion US dollars is to take over a large part of iPhone production there, thus competing with China as a production site. According to Indian experts, Foxconn’s commitment to the subcontinent is not least due to the influence of the United States – coupled with agreements arrived at in the Quad.

Despite certain impressions some observers may seek to convey, the Quad is not designed to be NATO’s Indo-Pacific counterpart. There is no alliance case in which an attack on one member would trigger a collective defence mechanism. Making a commitment of this kind would be contrary to India’s fundamental geostrategic principles. But Quad members do recognise that China wants to place itself at the forefront of the world order by raising its technological capabilities to a

world-class level, thereby maximising its power projection. Based on this realisation, the Quad has set up more than 20 working groups, which can be regarded as a kind of security policy precaution, or practically applied “de-risking”. Experts from the four member states and Quad partner countries engage in dialogue in these working groups on shared approaches to all kinds of practical issues, ranging from cyber security to commodity processing and pharmaceuticals. India’s 5G strategy was also discussed in the Quad, with the result that Chinese hardware and software companies – including manufacturers such as ZTE and Huawei, as well as TikTok and around 250 other apps – are being systematically excluded from the Indian economy.

## Germany has a key role to play in the negotiations on a free trade agreement.

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### Be More Assertive, Germany!

India’s strategic positioning vis-à-vis China provides an important framework when it comes to doing more to win over New Delhi as a partner for the West. Germany is well placed to play an active role in this endeavour. India and Germany have maintained a strategic partnership since 2000 and held their sixth bilateral government consultations last year. On his visit to India in February 2023, Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasised that the two countries shared the “foundation of democracy”, and he expressed very clearly the desire for even more far-reaching cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the range of bilateral cooperation is already enormous. At the same time, however, there is a sense in all areas that the full potential has not yet been harnessed. In this connection, there is also hope that in the long term, India can be relied on to take sides with the West in its geopolitical orientation. This ambition will not be fully realised in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, Germany can make an important contribution to gradual rapprochement by focusing





on India's clearly formulated interests and on its own strengths. Here, Germany should not be guided by the idea of seeking a "values-based partnership" with India, but instead should recognise where differences will remain and where more in-depth cooperation can benefit both sides strategically.

India's ambitious growth targets and the strengthening of its defence capabilities are the main orientation here. As India's most important trading partner by far within the EU, Germany has a key role to play in the negotiations on a free trade agreement launched in the summer of 2022. After the frustration of failure on the first attempt at such an agreement ten years ago due to irreconcilable positions, neither the EU nor India have any wish to fail again, nor can they afford to do so. It is true that ideas on the details of the agreement differ widely on some important issues, as an analysis by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs shows.<sup>10</sup> In the interest of closer ties with India, however, when weighing up concessions, it is ultimately up to influential EU member states such as Germany to also take into account the political capital that might be needed to shape the international order positively from the perspective of Europe and the West.

This does not necessarily mean going for something large-scale right away. When it comes to the meaningful expansion of Indo-German relations, Indian experts like to use the term "low-hanging fruit" to refer to projects that could actually be pursued without a great deal of effort. Professor D. Suba Chandran, Director of the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bangalore, suggests a technology partnership, for example.<sup>11</sup> India could benefit considerably from German expertise in the field of renewable energy and in the construction of

Great anger: Demonstrators protest against China in June 2020 in Bangalore. The protest was preceded by violent clashes in the Sino-Indian border region in the Himalayas between soldiers of the two countries. Photo: © Jagadeesh NV, epa, picture alliance.

batteries. Similarly, German experts could bring their expertise to bear in certain Quad working groups – on issues relating to the processing of minerals, for example, which are a key factor in breaking free from the Chinese supply of raw materials and services. Furthermore, the aspect of mobility between the two countries cannot be overestimated: prospects for work and study in Germany are a welcome element for India to promote its skilled workers, and the income flows to India thus generated play a not inconsiderable role in the Indian economy. This is why consistent implementation of the Migration and Mobility Agreement signed in December 2022 is of utmost importance – in particular the dismantling of visa hurdles.

Germany could also provide a major stimulus for deepening partnership and boosting mutual trust if it were to raise its arms policy towards India to a new level. India has long signalled interest and formulated concrete needs in this area. According to reports, Scholz and Modi also discussed a German offer of six submarines in the cost range of 5.2 billion US dollars in February.<sup>12</sup> In the future, treaties of this scope could help reduce India's dependence on Russia and – as an even greater incentive for New Delhi – give India the opportunity to improve its deterrence or defence capabilities vis-à-vis China. Here, too, it is important for Germany to examine and assess India's needs and expectations extremely carefully, for example with regard to manufacturing the submarines in India. Even if in some cases trade-offs would have to be made from an economic point of view, these could be offset by significant political gains.

### **Conclusion: India Is Going Its Own Way, but Hopefully Not Entirely Alone**

Those who hope that India will make a clear stand in the systemic conflict in favour of the West will be disappointed. As in the logo of India's G20 presidency, the lotus will continue to bloom solely in orange and green. Discussions in India are not dominated by talk of a systemic conflict but by India's aspiration to revitalise itself through massive economic

growth and to assert itself internationally. Modi has his sights set on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence in 2047. He is looking to use his party's policies to turn the country into a developed economy by then. India will continue to make decisions and enter into agreements based on this self-interest – whether or not these fit in with Western ideas and hopes of a global shift of power in favour of democracies.

Nevertheless, there are genuine overlaps in the geopolitical interests of India and the West. Due to the threat from China, New Delhi needs to perform a full-on balancing act that catalyses practical cooperation through forums such as the Quad while lending a sense of urgency to deeper economic relations with the EU. India does not wish to subscribe to the interpretation that a systemic conflict is being played out between autocracies and democracies, let alone entertain the notion that it could itself play a key role in this. However, it is acutely aware of the global shifts in power and seeks to play its self-appointed role as the advocate of the “Global South”. In the long run, India is striving for a multipolar order: its own demands are too high to be satisfied by simple affiliation to one side or the other in a systemic conflict that is being debated elsewhere. If Germany and its Western partners still want to ensure that India is aligned with them as closely as possible as it shapes its ambitions, they should tailor their offers as precisely as possible to India's concrete needs. Wherever possible, material concessions should be made in practical implementation with a view to building trust and generating political capital. Success stories of bilateral cooperation should also be told to greater effect. Germany in particular would do well to showcase its extensive cooperation with such an important partner country more effectively. The popularity points gained could well herald a new era in relations with the subcontinent.

*– translated from German –*

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[Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!](#)

# “I Am Pro-myself”

Uganda’s Response to Russia’s War of  
Aggression against Ukraine

Anna Reismann

“When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” This is an African proverb frequently heard in Uganda when people talk about Russia’s current war of aggression against Ukraine, in reference to the impact on the African continent. The United States and the West on the one hand and Russia on the other are seen as the big elephants. The political elite in Uganda has officially adopted a neutral stance, while at the same time attempting to use the international situation that has arisen to its own advantage. Against this background, Germany should clearly define its own interests and strengths and bring these into play in a targeted way to our mutual advantage.

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### **Neutrality as a Political Calculation**

With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, conventional interstate warfare returned to Europe. What most people had previously considered absolutely impossible became a reality. The voting panel in the United Nations General Assembly soon came to be the point of reference where support was indicated for either Ukraine or Russia. But it also came to reflect a moral scale between the “right” and the “wrong” side of history. The much emphasised fact that most states in the world are showing solidarity with Ukraine stands in stark contrast to the realisation that the majority of the world’s population is in fact on the side of those states that abstain or that sympathise with Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of the invasion, the international community has addressed its impact and consequences in six UN General Assembly votes, from the very first condemnation of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine through to the most recent vote on a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine in accordance with the UN Charter. Resolutions on the humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine and on support for the territorial integrity of the country have also been put to the vote. In all these votes, as well as in the two on suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and requiring Russia to pay reparations to Ukraine,

which received the most abstentions and votes against them, Uganda abstained. As such, it is the only country in East Africa that cast the same vote in all six ballots.

Kenya in particular, which had a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council until the end of 2022, always voted in favour, apart from abstaining in the vote to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. As early as 21 February 2022, at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, Kenya’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Martin Kimani, spoke for many Africans<sup>2</sup> when he stressed that Russia’s actions went against the principles of the Charter. Referring to the colonial history of the African continent, he warned against a backward-looking view of history that – combined with a dangerous sense of nostalgia – would result in new forms of domination and oppression. On behalf of Kenya, he rejected irredentism and expansion, regardless of their basis. At the same time, he strongly condemned the willingness of the major powers – among which he counted the members of the Security Council – to breach international law, as observed in the past decades.

Imperial expansion and the resulting disenfranchisement and oppression are all too familiar to the people of the African continent. The colonial experience of their peoples is an integral part

of their identity. How, then, can it be explained that a country with a long colonial history – such as Uganda – does not condemn every form of imperialism and colonialism, but instead takes what appears to be a “neutral” stance?

## Officially, the war against Ukraine is not considered an imperialist or colonialist war in Uganda.

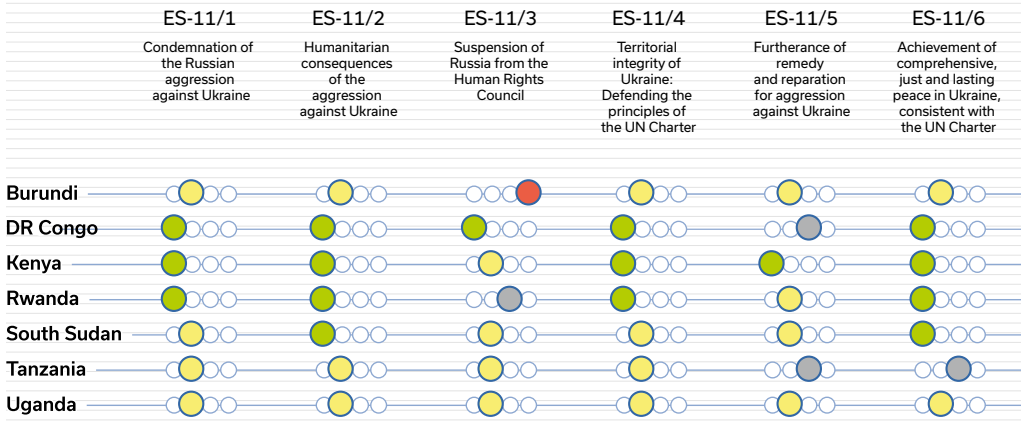
### Understanding Uganda’s Official Position

Officially, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is not considered in Uganda to be an imperialist or colonialist war. To assume that such an assessment is consensus within the entire political elite of the country would be wrong. However, this is not discussed publicly

and Uganda’s official position is de facto formulated by the highest authority, the country’s president himself. Publicly, the latter draws parallels to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. After the visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the end of July 2022 in particular, President Yoweri Museveni showed sympathy for Russia’s position that NATO enlargement was a threat to Russia.

Museveni also justifies a special bond with Russia by saying that after the Bolsheviks came to power and the Soviet Union was founded in 1917, the latter supported the African countries’ anti-colonial struggle. From this he reasons that Uganda cannot vote against a state that once supported it.<sup>3</sup> Even though the president claims that he does not want to side with either the West or Russia, his interpretation reflects patterns of thinking from the Cold War. The official justification given by Uganda’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations that

**Fig. 1: Voting Behavior of East African States in the UN General Assembly on Russia’s Attack on Ukraine**



• Vote in favour of resolution • Abstention • Absence • Vote against resolution. Sources: own illustration with data from UN 2022: Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43J6js> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43h0ipZ> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44yfEr7> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44ANBHI> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44fOxkX> [31 May 2023]; UN 2023: Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3D1FQ1t> [31 May 2023].



the country has a neutral position as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement also fits into this context.<sup>4</sup> Uganda is due to take over the chair of the movement from Azerbaijan in January 2024.

In addition to putting Uganda's position in a historical context, the president, as so often, is reiterating his fundamental stance that he refuses to be patronised, lectured or pressured by anyone. This accusation is mainly directed at Uganda's Western partners. In the current conflict situation, too, he is quick to point out publicly that efforts on the part of the "Western bloc" or the "Western group" to pull Uganda onto their side will be in vain. In an interview with the BBC in August 2022,<sup>5</sup> Museveni stated that the civilian contribution of the US is welcome "when they bring it but, if not, we shall survive, maybe do even better", thus implying that development aid would not translate into political leverage. It is a familiar rhetoric used by the president that flatters the self-esteem of many Ugandans. In reality, however, the country depends on these funds to a large extent.

### Western partners criticise the precarious human rights situation in Uganda.

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President Museveni is trying his hand at see-saw politics: he is keen to point out that the maxim for his actions is the distinction between "progressive and reactionary forces",<sup>6</sup> the "progressive forces" being those that support progress and stability. The ideological or political system concerned is irrelevant, he says: there are no preferred friends and no preferred groups. Yet even though many in the Ugandan elite appear to share this purported pragmatism, they are also keen to point out the advantages of cooperation with Western countries – albeit not at the price of paternalism. And indeed, exaggerated expectations on the part of Western partners and their sometimes evident paternalism reinforce a defensive attitude towards the West and increase the appeal of cooperation with other states.

### Regional Supremacy and Securing Power

Uganda's foreign policy is Africa-centred and, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aligned along three concentric rings.<sup>7</sup> In the inner and most important ring for Uganda's relations are its immediate neighbours, the East African Community, the IGAD states<sup>8</sup> and the Nile Basin. The centre ring comprises the rest of Africa, the African Union, COMESA<sup>9</sup> and the Middle East. The rest of the world and the relevant multilateral organisations form the outer ring. Uganda has only limited ambitions to play a role in actively shaping politics in the outer ring.

This is based on a quite realistic assessment of its own limited capacity to wield influence as one of the least developed countries in the world. The foreign policy mission is to safeguard national interests – first and foremost security. President Museveni sees himself as the guarantor and greatest fighter for peace, security in the region and the notion of pan-Africanism. He firmly believes that ensuring stability at home and in the region requires continuity at the top of the Ugandan state and vice versa. This view is widely accepted in the country itself and in the region, but also among international partners. Western countries in particular have supported Museveni for many years because they have seen him as a guarantor of stability in the region.

Museveni justifies his presidency, which has lasted 37 years, not least by the claim that he is indispensable as a leader pulling strings in the region and by his as yet not fully realised visions for bringing peace to the region and promoting its integration. International partners that assist him in consolidating his position of power at home and in the region are his allies. While traditional Western partners – the European Union and its member states, the United States and the United Kingdom – play a key role in securing stability in the region, they are also vocal critics of Uganda's domestic militarisation, the precarious human rights situation in the country and its authoritarian style of rule. Other international partners hold back on such criticism – Russia and China in particular. Instead, the latter two



The more difficult partners: While states such as China and Russia are not likely to criticise the domestic political situation in Uganda, there have been statements to this effect from Western Europe in the past. In the picture (left): Uganda's Foreign Minister Haji Abubaker Jeje Odongo at the 2022 EU-Africa Summit. [Photo: © Olivier Hoslet, AP, picture alliance.](#)

countries are competing to establish the “appropriate” form of authoritarian rule – a bureaucratic or a nepotistic one. In view of the strong criticism that the 2011 elections attracted from the country's Western partners, it is therefore not surprising that Museveni sought greater rapprochement with Russia and China in the wake of the elections. In this context, Museveni also raised the accusation of Western arrogance.

His advances towards Russia showed only limited success up until the first Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019, however. The interest in increased economic cooperation was not reciprocated by Russia. Bilateral trade between the two countries remained insignificant, and hopes of building an oil refinery were dashed, too. What has remained, tying into the shared history of relations between Uganda and the Soviet Union, is Russia's role in



the military sector. With the acquisition of six Sukhoi Su-30 multi-role fighter aircraft in 2011, Uganda's air force assumed a leading position in the East and Central African region.<sup>10</sup> The contract included a training programme for pilots and technicians. The situation seems to be similar with regard to the acquisition of Mil Mi-28N Havoc combat helicopters. The filmed and publicly shared use of these aircraft in the current fight against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was likely to serve the strategic interests of both Uganda and Russia. Both might have probably had other countries in the region in mind. Museveni could showcase the strength of his army and his own role as a playmaker in the region, while Russia was able to demonstrate its potential as a supplier of military equipment – a win-win situation for both countries.

However, any observer of how the war on Ukrainian soil is developing will not have failed to notice that Russia can no longer be a reliable supplier of military equipment since it is barely able to meet its own needs in the war against Ukraine. Nevertheless, as recently as April this year, Museveni was praising the military and technical cooperation with Russia. The occasion was a repaired Russian helicopter being put into operation at the airbase in Nakasongola, about 140 kilometres north of Kampala. Since the beginning of 2022, there has been a joint venture between the commercial arm of the Ugandan Armed Forces and the Russian company ProHeli International Services Limited. The intergovernmental working group on military technical collaboration between the two countries began work at the beginning of 2023. With Russia's support, Uganda hopes to establish a regional hub for development, upgrading and maintenance for all kinds of Soviet and Russian aviation equipment that is being used in Africa and even Latin America. On 18 May, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov underlined the potential of this project at a joint press conference with his Ugandan counterpart General Haji Abubaker Jeje Odongo in Moscow. It remains merely an ambitious vision for the time being, however, albeit one whose announcement

benefits both countries. The realisation of this ambitious project remains to be seen.

## Russia presents itself in Uganda as a country without an imperialist past.

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Based on an objective assessment of current Russian potential, it would make sense for Uganda to switch to new suppliers. It is doubtful that Western partners would fill this gap. Turkey, however, could become more important here – a NATO partner that has positioned itself strategically in Uganda and has also used anti-imperialist rhetoric that is critical of the West. Nonetheless, Uganda's financial capacity to purchase modern technology and equipment is limited.

### Russia's "Hard Soft Power" as a New Export Hit

Russia's offers of cooperation are not limited to the supply of military equipment, however. At the start of the full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia's embassies around the world launched a charm offensive.

The propaganda channel RT (formerly Russia Today) had secured airtime from the national public broadcaster, the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation. This was followed by articles written by the Russian ambassador in the country's most widely circulated newspapers and on the Russian Embassy's Twitter channel. This latter channel of communication, somewhat neglected up until then, saw a boost from 26 January 2022 – Uganda's National Liberation Day<sup>11</sup> – onwards when the Russian Embassy officially congratulated the country's leadership and the Ugandan people. Since then, the public has been kept actively informed of various Russian activities in Uganda: from official meetings with the Ugandan political leadership to the cooperation agreement between the ruling parties NRM (National Resistance Movement) and United Russia, the instruction of Ugandan soldiers in

Russian culture, the visit by the representative of the (Russian) Orthodox Church responsible for Africa, Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, Russia's plans to cooperate with Ugandan universities, and a new offer of a scholarship programme. All this is mixed in with strong anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric and propaganda, as well as the scattering of Russian disinformation. Russia is pulling out all the stops here, presenting itself as a fraternal nation with no colonial or imperialist past.

Russia is also offering cooperation in the areas of raw materials extraction, nuclear energy development, cyber security, telecommunications, geological research, pharmaceuticals and agriculture. On 18 May, the two countries signed a joint declaration in Moscow affirming to refrain from initiating the deployment of weapons in outer space. The level of development and the extent of the economic problems in both Russia and Uganda raise legitimate doubts as to the significance of such agreements beyond their declaratory nature.

On the other hand, Russian know-how and the country's longstanding experience of deliberately manipulating opinion should not be underestimated. It has become known that the Africa Back Office – a propaganda network believed to be associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Russian mercenary group Wagner – works closely with the Russian Embassy and the Ugandan Government Citizen Interaction Centre.<sup>12</sup> After the presidential and parliamentary elections in January 2021, this unit was made directly subordinate to the president as a kind of state communications agency, where it seems to be primarily responsible for developing and implementing communications strategies.

The recently passed Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act, strongly criticised by Western partners, must have been celebrated as a victory by the political class in Russia.<sup>13</sup> The framing of the whole debate surrounding the protection of traditional family values against alleged liberal influences from the West, the postulated incompatibility of homosexuality with people's

religious beliefs and cultural values, and the artificially constructed link with paedophilia is all too reminiscent of Russian narratives. A regional parliamentary conference held in Uganda at the end of March on the "protection of family values" found its way into a Russian news medium associated with the Wagner Group of all places.<sup>14</sup>

### Some observers fear that Uganda could slide into a new dependence on Russia.

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Uganda signed a contract with the Russian company M/S Joint Stock Company Global Security in July 2021 to produce new number plates with embedded surveillance chips. There was no award process.<sup>15</sup> The company would thus gain access to one of the most important data sets on the Ugandan population.

Against this background, some observers fear that Uganda could slide into a new dependence on Russia. This concern is certainly understandable. Speaking to the Russian news agency TASS, Museveni recently used language that was all too familiar in the former Soviet Union: "I will definitely come to St. Petersburg in July [2023]. In this issue, the political will is of crucial importance. It is not an issue of needs, but an issue of ideology. As long as you profess the ideology of equality and brotherhood, the other things are simply details."<sup>16</sup> Yet Russia has always used the rhetoric of equality and fraternity to propagate its colonial claim to rule over the smaller "brother nations". At the planned second Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in July 2023, Russia will continue to make great efforts to instil greater loyalty among African countries.

Russia's new courtship of Uganda and the promise of cooperation in various fields are falling on fertile ground in the East African country. Yet it is not only the bilateral relationship with Russia and the hopes and expectations associated with

this that determine Uganda's position. Uganda's relations with countries such as South Africa and India, and the positions these countries have adopted, also play a role.

South Africa and Uganda – and in particular the ruling parties ANC (African National Congress) and NRM – share a very strong historical bond, forged in the struggle against apartheid and the colonial system with the support of the Soviet Union. This plays an important role in the position adopted towards Russia in particular. The false equation of the Soviet Union with Russia is deliberate: it serves the own founding myth and seems plausible in justifying the current position. While South Africa has always officially abstained in all UN votes, it is one of the BRICS states and pursues its own interests in that group. Sympathies with Russia cannot be denied: the joint military exercises carried out on the anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were hardly a coincidence.

### **Despite the impact of the war on people's day-to-day lives in Uganda, they currently have other concerns.**

Relations with India also occupy a special place in Uganda's history. The contribution of Indian immigrants to the development of the country has played an indispensable role – both in economic and political terms. The tax revenue from companies whose founders have Indian roots and the good connections to India are of enormous importance to Uganda's economy. India, on the other hand, sees Russia more as a necessary partner or even ally than as a rival<sup>17</sup> and has also consistently abstained from voting at the UN level.

Like Turkey, India and South Africa are trying to take advantage of the current geopolitical situation to reposition themselves globally as new emerging powers. Uganda maintains good relations with them and is counting on

benefiting from this competition for influence. Various alliances such as the BRICS states and the Non-Aligned Movement are also trying to take advantage of the momentum that has been created. Well versed in power games, President Museveni is likely to see this as an opportunity for himself and his hold on power as well as in terms of Uganda's development interests.

### **Not a Watershed Moment, but Time for Pragmatism and Economic Cooperation**

All this is likely to be playing a role in Uganda's current tactics on the international stage. There is little to no public debate on this subject: the population has other concerns. Although people are indeed struggling with the increased price of fuel, food and other daily essentials as a result of the war in Ukraine, economic scarcity and worries about the future are already familiar to many people.

Conflicts, acts of war and death are omnipresent phenomena in people's perception. The African Great Lakes region is one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the world, with the civil war in Ethiopia having cost the lives of around 600,000 people according to some estimates. Uganda provides the largest UN contingent in Somalia. The Ugandan army has had its own troops stationed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since December 2021. These are just three examples to illustrate why the current war in Europe is not only perceived as geographically distant on the African continent, but also as not entirely unique in its brutality. Ending it and building peace are regarded as being Europe's responsibility. The Ugandan elite and population do not regard this war and Russia's malicious violation of international law as a historical caesura. Appeals for support for Ukraine in defence of the common global security order remain ineffective in view of the precedent of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the associated accusation that the West is applying double standards.

The attack on Ukraine did not divide the world into the "good guys" and the "bad guys". The

West may currently stand together more firmly than before, but it has not necessarily gained more influence globally.<sup>18</sup> A window of opportunity has opened for other actors to reassert their position in the world. Political leaders in many states – including Uganda – will attempt to use the new geopolitical situation to their own advantage. Germany must decide how to deal with those countries that deliberately refrain from taking sides. In Uganda, Germany has the advantage of having established itself as a reliable partner over a period of decades. Germany's contribution to Uganda's development is appreciated. Its technological know-how is highly regarded, as is its economic development after the Second World War. Germany should see this as an opportunity to do more to promote Uganda's economic development in the interest of both sides. After all, this is seen as a priority by Uganda's population – and by the entire political and economic elite.

Uganda is currently the second youngest country in the world, with an average age of about 15.7 years. The population is growing rapidly. Currently, according to different sources, there are between 48 and 50 million people living in Uganda. If the current trend of around 3.7 per cent annual population growth continues, the 100 million mark will be exceeded in 2050. This poses enormous challenges for the country not only in terms of employment opportunities, but also when it comes to providing social and technical infrastructure. The economy has to be modernised and diversified. There is a need for industrialisation and increased productivity in numerous sectors.

Germany would be well advised to play a role with a view to generating greater prosperity and to determine where it can make a significant

Other concerns: While the war in Ukraine is perceived in Europe as a watershed moment, many people in Uganda consider it a distant conflict. Economic needs and poverty characterise their everyday lives. [Photo: © Dai Kurokawa, dpa, picture alliance.](#)





contribution in this context. This cannot be done with publicly funded initiatives and resources alone. Development policy cannot assume the role of the private sector, nor can it produce desirable economic development or social transformation. Foreign economic policy and the private sector must be given a more important role.

It would be advisable to create more capacities to bring German and Ugandan economic actors together. It is time to stop hiding behind the argument that the German economic system does not allow the state to interfere in the decision-making of private sector actors. Instead, concrete support and risk minimisation mechanisms should be developed to increase the number of German investment projects on the ground. Where do Germany's strengths lie in this area? What investments and technology transfer could be supported? What potential instruments are there?

These might include special credit lines for German companies, funding for training and exchange programmes, the award of scholarships, lending to Ugandan companies as part of their corporate social responsibility, and public-private partnerships, among others. Digital opportunities allow companies to collaborate with each other without having to opt for a location: this minimises the risk and opens up new opportunities. New generations of entrepreneurs, such as in the field of start-ups in both countries, are open-minded and willing to take to risks. Such actors should be specifically identified and supported. Some of the founders in Uganda even come from Germany or were trained there. This offers considerable potential for mutual innovation transfer, but also the opportunity to tap into varying markets and harness the scope for action on both sides. There should be more initiative in terms of seeking out dialogue with Ugandan companies and asking them what trade and market entry barriers they see for their products on the European market so as to feed this knowledge into the European institutions. Any shift of value chains to Europe entails a loss of jobs in Uganda. For this reason, market barriers in Europe must be dismantled,

with better use being made of creative and innovative potential so as to bring about the desired change. What is needed is an orientation towards the merit principle, support for socially responsible key players in different sectors in the country itself, and trust in their judgement. These actors in particular are the people who need to build their own countries.

Greater economic participation by the so-called Global South is in Germany's interest. But this also presupposes a willingness to withstand ambivalence. At present, it is particularly important for all sides to tolerate the global simultaneity of differing needs, values and interests. If the aim is to maintain relations geared towards mutual interests, it will be necessary to find the lowest common denominator with some countries and accept this as a basis. With other countries, the overlap in terms of values and common interests will be greater. Western countries that try to put pressure on states like Uganda to take sides or impose their standards on them will inevitably risk more emphatic rejection of their values and democratic principles. A better option would be to strengthen the role of experienced actors such as political foundations, which have a long record of building long-term relations and international networks to promote democracy. It is precisely in countries open to cooperation with autocratic and democratic actors alike where the latter should invest more in academic and cultural exchange. It is only through direct positive experience of democracies that their value can be appreciated. At the same time, democracies are attractive above all when they produce desirable results for the majority of the population, in particular with regard to economic and social participation, security and technological progress, thereby creating the basis for stability and peace.

*- translated from German -*

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Photo: © Rao Aimin, Xinhua News Agency

Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!

# The Courted Bride?

Argentina in the New Global Order

Susanne Käss

In times of an energy and food crisis triggered by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the countries of the European Union are among those increasingly looking to Argentina again. The South American G20 country is the third largest economy in Latin America and holds enormous potential, especially in the areas of energy and food production.<sup>1</sup> Yet Argentina has long been courted intensely by the major powers China and Russia due to its wealth of resources and its strategic location as a gateway to the Antarctic. How is the country positioning itself within the new power structure, and what are the interests and needs that shape Argentina's foreign policy?

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### **Past Glories and Tangible Problems**

One hundred years ago, Argentina was one of the richest countries in the world and attracted numerous immigrants from all over Europe. Due to the boom in agricultural production, Argentina became known as the breadbasket of the world.<sup>2</sup> The remnants of this golden age are still omnipresent in the urban landscape of Buenos Aires with its wide avenues, parks and magnificent buildings, yet numerous palaces of the Belle Époque era are crumbling away, and many former residences of the upper middle classes are up for sale.

Despite the country's impressive wealth of resources, Argentina has been stuck in an economic crisis with high inflation and debt rates for decades. The annual inflation rate in February 2023 was 102.5 per cent<sup>3</sup> and confidence in the national currency has long since dwindled, both among the population and on the international financial markets. Resignation and a sense of hopelessness prevail among the Argentine people. Many well-educated Argentines from the middle and upper classes are leaving the country to build a future in Europe or North America. A once prosperous country has become impoverished. This was recently lamented by Pope Francis, himself an Argentine, who noted that the poverty rate was only

five per cent when he finished secondary school but now affected half the population.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the acute lack of foreign currency, Argentina is repeatedly on the verge of no longer being able to pay for vital imports, despite a mega-loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2018 – the largest ever to be granted to a single country. The dollar is worth almost twice as much on the black market as it is according to the official peso exchange rate, and inflation is resulting in capital flight. The government is trying to counter the problems by imposing price controls and export restrictions on food, which is having a negative impact on the agricultural sector in particular. In 2023, a year of multiple elections, there is enormous pressure on politicians to stop this downward spiral and, if possible, to reverse it. Yet mismanagement and corruption have led to a severe crisis of confidence in politics among citizens.

### **Argentina: Land of Opportunity?**

Despite these problems, China has been taking a close interest in Argentina for some time now. European countries have also been paying more attention to the country again since 2022. The Patagonian province of Neuquén is home to the second largest shale gas reserves in the world.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the country has oil reserves and

ideal conditions for the production of renewable energies, with strong and constant winds in the south and numerous hours of sunshine, especially in the north. Large areas of land are as yet unused, while freshwater resources are sustainably available in Patagonia. The country thus holds enormous potential for the production of green hydrogen.<sup>6</sup> The third largest lithium reserves in the world are to be found in the northwest, and Argentina is already the fourth largest producer of the much-coveted “white gold”.<sup>7</sup> It also has deposits of lead, zinc, tin, copper, iron ore and manganese.<sup>8</sup>

### When it comes to Argentina’s contribution to solving Europe’s energy bottlenecks, there is a huge gulf between aspiration and reality.

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Considered a moderate Peronist but now severely tarnished by the failure of his government, President Alberto Fernández highlighted the excellent conditions his country offers for energy production on his trip to Europe in May and June 2022. Argentina will not be able to contribute to solving the European energy bottlenecks in the short to medium term, however: there is a huge gulf between aspiration and reality here. The country is still a net importer of energy and there is a lack of infrastructure to produce and, in particular, transport gas in larger quantities in Patagonia.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there are now opportunities for foreign companies to secure market shares in the promising hydrogen economy.

The most important source of foreign exchange earnings is currently agriculture. With a population of 46 million people, it is estimated that the country is capable of producing food for ten times that number, thereby contributing to global food security.<sup>10</sup> Argentina was already the world’s seventh largest wheat exporter in 2021 and has the capacity to increase

production even further.<sup>11</sup> Besides wheat, large quantities of beef, milk, soy, cane sugar, wine, barley, grapes and citrus fruits are produced, but export restrictions are slowing down the increase in food production.

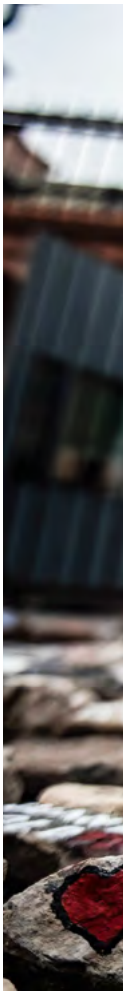
There are other areas that are attracting the attention of global players, too. Argentina’s large number of “unicorns”<sup>12</sup> reflects the innovative capacity of the country’s start-up economy. Argentina is of geopolitical interest because of its strategic location as a gateway to the Antarctic. Some 70 per cent of the planet’s freshwater reserves are concentrated in the continent’s ice. The Antarctic also has a key role to play in terms of climate and environmental protection: krill in particular binds greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and is also the food basis for numerous species. In addition, the Antarctic has a rich diversity of resources – mainly minerals. The melting ice masses make mining more realistic, thereby awakening increased interest in the region.

### Interests and Needs as a Driving Force in Argentina’s Foreign Policy

Since Russia’s attack on Ukraine, Europe has increasingly been calling for democratic emerging countries to position themselves clearly within the systemic conflict. Although the war is being closely observed in Buenos Aires, some 12,800 kilometres away from Kyiv, and the impact of the conflict on energy and food prices is further fuelling galloping inflation, the government is avoiding interpreting the war as taking place against the backdrop of a deeper systemic conflict between democracy and authoritarianism in which every country has to take a stand.

There are several reasons why Argentina is not taking sides and does not share the Western interpretation:

- The government primarily cites the principle of non-interference as justification for not taking a clear position on the war in Ukraine. It is questionable, however, whether this justification stands up to deeper analysis: with



its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia is clearly violating the basic principles of non-interference and the right of states to self-determination, which, in Argentina, are respected as a precious asset. There is a deeply rooted aversion to interference in internal affairs – not least due to the country’s colonial past and US interference in the affairs of Latin American states, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, already during the Cold War, Argentina was a member of the group of non-aligned states from 1973 to 1991, deliberately avoiding taking sides in the confrontation between the major powers.<sup>13</sup>

- While the United States has traditionally exerted a powerful influence in Latin America, it has latterly left the field to other powers, not least as a result of the Obama administration’s 2011 announcement of its “pivot to Asia”. The vacuum this left was eagerly filled by China and Russia.<sup>14</sup> President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, a left-wing Peronist who was openly critical of the United States, was in power in Argentina during this period. She was happy to take advantage of the US change of course and of concrete offers extended by Russia and China as an opportunity to distance herself from the United States



Mourning and anger: In August 2021, people in Buenos Aires commemorated those who had died from COVID-19 with painted stones, thus also protesting against the government’s pandemic management. However, there was also disappointment about Europe due to its slow delivery of vaccines. Photo: © Manuel Cortina, ZUMA Press, picture alliance.

in her rhetoric, expanding South-South cooperation and partnerships with other left-wing governments.

- As a result of immigration, Argentina is one of the most Europeanised countries in Latin America, and Europe continues to be a dream destination for many emigrants. However, European countries have increasingly shifted their gaze away from Latin America in recent decades, too. People have felt abandoned on the Río de la Plata, especially in times of need. This was particularly evident at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Latin America extremely hard. Deliveries of vaccines from Europe through the COVAX initiative were slow and insufficient. As a result, mainly Russian and Chinese vaccines were used at the start of the vaccination campaign. Europe criticised the “vaccination diplomacy” of China and Russia<sup>15</sup> – but this criticism was perceived in Argentina as a sign of arrogance and cynicism. Bonds of trust with Europe suffered severely, while there is an ongoing sense of gratitude towards Russia and China.
- Due to the difficult economic situation, Argentina is heavily dependent on foreign investment and loans, hence it cannot always choose its partners freely. European companies complain about the erratic nature of the country’s policy and the lack of legal certainty. Both the EU and individual EU states attach conditions to cooperation, especially with regard to maintaining environmental standards. For this reason, they are perceived as difficult partners.
- Europe attempts to cite the narrative of a partnership of values.<sup>16</sup> This goes down well among the pro-European population, but it is being met with increasing scepticism by politicians, since the concrete offers made are perceived as insufficient and the nature of cooperative relations is felt to be patronising.

Argentina’s foreign policy is of course influenced by the ideological orientation of the respective

government. From 2015 to 2019, the government of the liberal-conservative Mauricio Macri called for the “reintegration of Argentina in the world” with strong ties to the West without neglecting relations with China and Russia.<sup>17</sup> Under the government of Alberto Fernández, Argentina maintains close relations with the left-wing political forces in Latin America. Together with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Fernández is setting the tone in the Puebla Group established in 2019. The government’s ideological positioning and the resulting proximity to other left-wing governments influences the foreign policy pursued by Argentina, also giving rise to discrepancies. This is reflected in its voting behaviour in international organisations, for example: in the United Nations General Assembly, Argentina voted to condemn Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, but in a vote held by the Organization of American States (OAS) to reject the Russian invasion, Argentina abstained.<sup>18</sup> And although the protection of human rights is a guiding principle in Argentina’s foreign policy, Argentina abstained from voting in the UN Human Rights Council on a discussion of the report issued by the High Commissioner for Human Rights about the situation in Xinjiang.

### Argentina is Germany’s third most important trading partner in Latin America.

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Argentina’s positioning has been the subject of intense debate in foreign policy circles, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the economic and structural constraints to which it is subject, Argentina is regarded as a country with limited autonomy on the periphery that cannot afford to adopt an unambiguous stance in the increasingly clear bipolar confrontation between the United States and China.<sup>19</sup> Within this debate, a country’s scope for action in foreign policy is seen as being dependent on its political power and its actual potential to exert influence within regional and international

structures.<sup>20</sup> The sense is that Argentina must not fall into the trap of a 2.0 version of the Cold War.<sup>21</sup>

## International Relations and Cooperation

Argentina is Germany's third most important trading partner in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico.<sup>22</sup> The main buyer of Argentine exports is Brazil, followed by China and the United States. Argentina's main supplier country is China, closely followed by Brazil and well ahead of the United States.<sup>23</sup> In the following, selected aspects of Argentina's cooperation with individual countries and alliances will be examined.

### There is growing criticism among Argentine politicians and the population about the Chinese engagement.

#### *Mercosur*

Politically, Mercosur, the economic alliance founded in 1991 by Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay, seemed to awaken from a long period of lethargy when negotiations on the Association Agreement with the EU were concluded in 2019. Yet some actors are not particularly hopeful about the pending ratification. Uruguay, for example, is bilaterally negotiating a free trade agreement with China – much to the displeasure of the other Mercosur countries, which see the already fragile alliance as being in jeopardy. Yet Uruguay's attitude not only testifies to disparities and a lack of consultation within Mercosur; it also reflects frustration at the blockade mentality of the European partners. Ties with Brazil are particularly important for Argentina in economic terms, but political relations were icy between the governments of Jair Bolsonaro and Alberto Fernández. Argentina is now hoping for a significant improvement in this area under the Lula government, also with a view to giving Mercosur a fresh boost.

#### *China*

In February 2022, Argentina joined the “new Silk Road” (Belt and Road Initiative) – the culmination of years of economic and political rapprochement with China. Argentina is important to China as a supplier of raw materials and food, whereas the deeply indebted South American country particularly needs investment in infrastructure projects. Under the Belt and Road Initiative alone, projects worth a total of 23.7 billion US dollars are to be implemented in Argentina in two phases in the areas of energy, water and sanitation infrastructure, and transport.<sup>24</sup> The agreements also include a currency swap deal between the Argentine peso and the yuan, with the aim of simplifying trade so as to benefit Argentina in view of its ongoing foreign currency shortage. Chinese companies are investing very heavily in the mining sector, including lithium and copper. Argentina's economic dependence on China is enormous. The Argentine government is also considering the purchase of Sino-Pakistani fighter jets.<sup>25</sup> The possibilities open to it for purchasing Western weapons systems are limited due to the British arms embargo in force since the Falklands/Malvinas War. Beijing is trying to maintain good political relations, too. Members of parliament, senators, mayors and even young politicians are regularly invited on luxurious trips to the “Middle Kingdom”. China favours Argentina's accession to the BRICS alliance and is courting the country intensely.

Nonetheless, there is growing criticism among politicians and the population. The Chinese space agency operates a space station in the Argentine province of Neuquén. Exclusive use of this vast Patagonian site was promised to China by the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007 to 2015) for 50 years, and Argentine authorities are denied access. The Macri government renegotiated the exclusively civilian use of the station in 2016, but control mechanisms are lacking.<sup>26</sup> After the national government rejected Chinese participation in an expansion of the port in Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego on the grounds of preserving national sovereignty over critical infrastructure, the governor of the province signed an



Visit to Moscow: In early February 2022, Argentine President Alberto Fernández met his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. When Russia invaded Ukraine shortly afterwards, Argentina condemned the act in the UN General Assembly – but was hesitant to unambiguously oppose Moscow in other organisations. Photo: © Sergei Karpukhin, dpa/TASS, picture alliance.

agreement with the Chinese state-owned enterprise China Shaanxi Coal and Chemical Industry Group in December 2022 on the construction of a port in the municipality of Río Grande. Critics fear that China is seeking at all costs to build a port that it can use as a gateway to the Antarctic.<sup>27</sup> What is more, the coast guard expects this will further encourage illegal Chinese fishing with trawl nets in Argentine waters.

#### *Russia*

Exactly three weeks before the Russian attack on Ukraine, the Argentine president stressed, during a state visit to Moscow, that Argentina wished to act as a gateway to Latin America for Russia. He also said his country would be eternally grateful to Russia for supplying COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>28</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's



government had already negotiated a cooperation agreement with Russia in 2015 in the areas of energy, the chemical industry, banking and the expansion of the rail network. In December 2021, the Argentine and Russian defence ministers signed a military cooperation agreement which, among other things, provides for the training of Argentine military personnel in Russia.<sup>29</sup>

The Argentine government is also allowing Russia to disseminate propaganda and misinformation at the taxpayer's expense: since Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's last presidency, the television channel RT – previously known as Russia Today – can be received throughout Argentina via digital public television. The Macri government triggered a diplomatic crisis with Russia when it tried to stop the broadcast. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened to withdraw funding for the construction of a dam being provided by the State Corporation Bank. The then President Mauricio Macri abandoned his plans in response to this pressure.<sup>30</sup>

### **Anti-Americanism is widespread among the Argentine population.**

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Little has been reported publicly about Russian-Argentine relations since the beginning of the war. The fact that Argentina has not joined the sanctions against Russia and its contradictory voting behaviour in international organisations suggest the country does not want to jeopardise relations with Russia.

#### *United States*

Anti-Americanism is widespread among the Argentine population. The United States is equated with the International Monetary Fund, an object of hatred among broad sections of the population. Bilateral cooperation involves projects on scientific cooperation in

the space sector, biotechnology, medicine and the agricultural sector, and there is a binational working group on energy issues.<sup>31</sup> At the regional level, cooperation takes place through the OAS.

#### *Germany*

Economic relations between Argentina and Germany are close. Germany sources raw materials and food from Argentina and is the largest buyer of Argentine beef within the EU. The two countries have close cultural ties, too, not least due to the approximately one million Argentines with German roots. Germany is a recognised partner in scientific cooperation.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the “BMZ 2030” reform of 2020, Argentina has ceased to be a partner country of German bilateral development cooperation, but an energy dialogue is being conducted via the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) to develop a green hydrogen economy.<sup>33</sup> Politically, Argentina has received much attention on account of visits to the country by top German politicians: in recent months alone, in addition to German parliamentarians, these have included trips by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the First Mayor of Hamburg Peter Tschentscher with a business delegation, BMWK Parliamentary State Secretary Franziska Brantner on two occasions, Minister of State Tobias Lindner and State Secretary Jennifer Morgan of the Federal Foreign Office, and Parliamentary State Secretary Jens Brandenburg of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

#### *European Union*

The EU works with Argentina at various levels on issues such as climate and environmental protection, social cohesion and development, gender equality, science, security, the economy and human rights.<sup>34</sup> Cultural proximity to Argentina is probably greater than to any other Latin American country due to its migratory past, and for a long time Europe enjoyed an excellent reputation. The EU's attitude during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a massive loss of

trust, however. Relations are currently focused on the ratification of the Association Agreement between the EU and Mercosur, but Argentina is sceptical about the attitude of countries such as France and Poland, which are not prepared to open their markets to imports of agricultural products.

At the political level in particular, people complain that double standards are being applied. On the one hand, the negotiated market opening does not seem to be enforceable with all EU states; on the other hand, the EU is calling for the negotiation of additional protocols on aspects such as the setting of environmental standards, which, in Europe's view, should have the same status as the text of the treaty already negotiated. The Mercosur states fear a reopening of treaty negotiations through the back door. Moreover, not everyone is happy about the fact that Argentina's shift back into the EU's political focus is only due to EU countries having to compensate for the loss of energy and raw material supplies caused by the war.

### **In the Argentine perception, Europe appears patronising and applies double standards: it seems to demand a lot while delivering very little.**

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#### **Appeal for an Honest Partnership between Germany, the EU and Argentina**

In view of its political instability as well as a lack of planning reliability and legal certainty, Argentina is not an easy partner. Yet the EU and Germany have made mistakes in recent years, too. Given the deep cultural ties and Argentina's strategic and economic potential, however, more in-depth cooperation is worthwhile for both sides. The pandemic and the war in Europe have thrown a bright spotlight on differing views of world events, although these differences were formed over a much longer period of time.

In order to be able to cooperate even more closely in the future, it will be crucial not merely to make differences in perspective more visible through greater political dialogue but also to take these differences seriously. The expectations of Germany and the EU on the one hand and Argentina on the other are not always identical. European companies need planning reliability and legal certainty to invest, but Argentina is in need of investments right away to overcome its enormous economic and social problems. Introducing and maintaining environmental standards is indispensable when it comes to climate protection, but from the point of view of the Argentine actors there are even more urgent problems for which the country requires support in solving.

Having proclaimed a *Zeitenwende* or “watershed moment”, Europe and Germany are looking for democratic allies, criticising the fact that large emerging countries are dependent on authoritarian world powers. Yet the interdependencies with China on the European side are no less pronounced – as demonstrated by Chinese involvement in the port of Hamburg. European states – especially Germany – also used to maintain close economic relations with Russia until the start of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. For Argentina, building economic and political relations with other powers besides the United States and Europe is part of diversifying its economic and political relations. China and Russia are making concrete offers without setting such rigorous conditions as the EU. Germany recommends that Argentina should focus on expanding renewable energies rather than on fracking gas, while at the same time looking for new suppliers of fossil fuels in non-democratic states. In the Argentine perception, Europe appears patronising and applies double standards: it seems to demand a lot while delivering very little.

If Europe does not wish to leave the field to powers like China and Russia, it must rethink the instruments it uses for cooperation. While the EU as a decentralised actor cannot match the economic power and joined-up cooperation

in all areas that China exemplifies, European countries hold soft power that should not be underestimated. Argentines want to live like Europeans: they do not seek to emulate the one-party state of China. In many fields of cooperation – especially in the area of science, e. g. in Antarctic research – European actors enjoy a very good reputation and are not seen as merely pursuing their own agenda to the same extent as other players are. Areas such as renewable energies, the development of a green hydrogen economy and scientific cooperation are attractive fields for expanding honest cooperation on an equal footing. In order to be able to participate on a sustainable basis, instruments of state cooperation should be more closely interlinked with economic activities. If Europe is genuinely interested in deepening cooperation, concrete projects must be developed. Based on an integrated approach involving the European private sector and instruments of financial and technical cooperation, conceivable options here include direct investments and loans for the expansion of Argentina’s gas export infrastructure and purchase guarantees for Argentine gas as a “bridge fuel” for the energy transition, on condition that the profits are partly reinvested in the green hydrogen sector as a technology for the future, backed up by technical cooperation programmes. If the EU wants to demonstrate that its rediscovered interest in Latin America is serious, it can best do so by ratifying the Association Agreement with Mercosur without driving the Latin American partners into a corner by negotiating the additional protocols too rigorously. Europe is well advised to seize this opportunity: after all, the development of renewable energy sources and the protection of the Antarctic are issues that will determine the future of our planet.

*– translated from German –*

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Systemic Conflict? No Thanks!

# Climate Action in the Global South

Revitalised Cooperation or Exacerbated Polarisation?

Sabina Wölkner

Combining climate protection with economic progress is key if we want to revitalise our cooperation with developing and emerging countries. Sustainability can provide an added value in this context, if and when it makes concrete contributions to partner countries' development. In view of current geopolitical developments and given their own ambivalent climate policies, Germany and the EU must shape these partnerships in a pragmatic, flexible and strategic way.

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International climate policy is focused on the target of doing everything possible to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era. The aim is to achieve climate neutrality by the middle of the century. According to the current findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), this target can only still be met by means of a massive reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions. The 1.5-degree target was reaffirmed at the UN Climate Change Conference in Sharm El-Sheikh. Nonetheless, there is a considerable gap between this declaration of intent and the decarbonisation pathways being pursued by the parties to the Paris Agreement. The voluntary commitments announced to date by the various countries – the so-called Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – are far from sufficient. Indeed, global average temperatures have already risen by approximately 1.1 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial times.

The consequences of climate change are already visible, and it is the developing countries that are particularly affected. The frequency and intensity of extreme weather events have increased significantly in recent years – and the poorest of the poor are doubly punished. They lack the capacity and resources to guard against this. At the same time, they bear virtually no responsibility for anthropogenic climate change. This concerns Africa in particular, where the vast majority of the 46 least developed countries (LDCs) are located. Accounting for about one fifth of the world's population, the continent is responsible for less than three per cent of the

world's energy-related emissions. It is true that South Africa's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have seen a rapid increase, but Sub-Saharan Africa still has the lowest per capita emissions rate in the world.<sup>1</sup>

### **Industrialised Nations and Emerging Countries Are in the Same Boat**

These countries are not the main contributors to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. While China, by far the largest emitter, has a share of almost 31 per cent (2021) of annual global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the United States is in second place with just under 13 per cent. They are followed by India (about 7 per cent), Russia (4.7 per cent) and Japan (just under 3 per cent). In a global comparison, Germany is in seventh place at just under 2 per cent. Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and South Korea are also in the top ten.<sup>2</sup>

If we look at energy-related global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita (2021), this alters the ranking in that Qatar, with 35 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per capita, the United Arab Emirates (just under 22 tonnes), Saudi Arabia (just under 19) and Australia (15) are at the top of the list. Seen from this perspective, the figure for the United States, at just under 15 tonnes, is significantly higher than for China (around 8 tonnes) and India in particular (just under 2 tonnes). Germany is in the middle of the pack along with the Netherlands at around 8 tonnes per capita, followed by Malaysia (also just under 8 tonnes), Norway and South Africa (both 7).<sup>3</sup> While per capita emissions in the industrialised countries are declining, they are growing rapidly in the emerging countries and in China.

Both sets of figures clearly show that the decline in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions required to meet the Paris climate targets can only be achieved by means of joint action. The main responsibility for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions lies with the Western industrialised countries, but the emerging markets are catching up. If we look at the climate footprint of the G20 – a forum that brings together industrialised countries and the economically strongest emerging economies – it is clear that efforts must include this group of nations, too.

The elephant in the room is China: despite its extremely high CO<sub>2</sub> figures, Beijing insists on continuing to be treated as a developing country in international climate negotiations. This classification is based on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted in 1992 and the principle enshrined therein of “common but differentiated responsibility”, according to which – in line with the “polluter pays” principle – the industrialised countries are required to make the largest contribution to combating climate change, while the developing countries receive financial support. In sticking to its classification as a developing country, Beijing thus sees the United States and the other Western industrialised nations as having to bear the greatest burden. This position no longer appears to be in keeping with the times, however. Since its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China has increased its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions enormously and is now second only to the United States in terms of historically accumulated emissions (1875 to the present).

### **Renaissance of Coal – Fuel for Global Growth**

China’s large carbon footprint is due to the fossil fuels in the country’s energy mix and its enormously high level of consumption. In the electricity sector, coal dominates at about 60 per cent. According to data published by the Global Energy Monitor, the country is adding new coal-fired power capacity every year. Last year alone, it approved a total capacity of 106 gigawatts, which is equivalent to about 100 large coal-fired power plants.<sup>4</sup> Today, China is responsible for more than half of global coal consumption.

Yet China is by no means an isolated case. In India, too, the main share of emissions in the energy sector comes from coal-fired power generation, followed by industry (steel and cement) and the transport sector. In 2022, coal-related carbon emissions increased by about six per cent compared with the previous year. Although CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are only at about one third of the EU’s per capita figure, the country’s projected population and economic growth will cause a further increase in energy consumption.

### **Most recently, it has been the non-OECD countries that have been responsible for the rapid growth in coal consumption.**

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A similar growth dynamic is evident in Indonesia, with experts predicting it will become the fourth largest economy by 2050. Its global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are still far below those of India, with a share of around 1.7 per cent, but here again, the largest share of emissions comes from coal combustion. At the same time, based on a regional comparison, Indonesia has the highest share of coal in its electricity production (around 80 per cent).

These developments are in line with the assessment by experts that in recent decades, it has been the non-OECD countries – above all China and India – that have been responsible for the rapid growth in coal consumption.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the growth curve in the industrialised countries has continued to flatten, even though in 2021 the United States still ranked third in the world with around 10 exajoules of installed coal capacity. This ranking was led by China with some 86 exajoules. India comes next with around 20 exajoules, followed by Japan (4 exajoules), and then South Africa, Russia and Indonesia (all around 3).<sup>6</sup> Fatih Birol, Executive Director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), warns that the “historically high level of coal power generation is a worrying sign of how far off track the world is in its efforts to put emissions into decline towards net zero.”<sup>7</sup>

## Climate Action and the Russian War of Aggression – Setback or Reset?

In the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, global coal consumption has not only continued unabated. While it was previously fuelled by the non-OECD countries, consumption in the EU and its member states likewise increased in the course of 2022. Driven by concerns about security of supply due to the war-related energy crisis, Germany in particular increasingly put old coal-fired power plants back into operation. Even though, according to the 2022 World Energy Report, this did not result in a further increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the EU, emerging countries – above all the BRICS states – saw this as evidence of alleged

“double standards” and issued a joint statement at the UN Climate Change Conference in Egypt denouncing the Europeans' actions.<sup>8</sup> Germany in particular was criticised for sharply increasing its coal imports from South Africa while at the same time never tiring of invoking the global coal phase-out.

But the IEA also sees the war as a turning point and does not regard the short-term growth in European coal consumption as working against the target of climate neutrality in the long term.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, coal consumption in the EU has been in decline for decades and is to be made entirely unprofitable by the gradual expiry of CO<sub>2</sub> certificates under the reformed Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). Moreover,



Two sides of the same coin: While China has the largest installed solar and wind energy capacity worldwide, it is also the world's number one emitter of carbon dioxide. Photo: © CFOTO, NurPhoto, picture alliance.



since the war of aggression started, Brussels has been expanding its incentive schemes to drive the expansion of renewables: just as coal consumption in Europe reached an all-time high, the share of renewables in the electricity supply increased as well. New peak levels were already reached last year throughout the EU.<sup>10</sup>

## While China and Indonesia aim to be carbon neutral by 2060, India is giving itself time until 2070.

Experts expect a run on renewables worldwide, too. By 2027, newly installed renewable electricity capacity is expected to increase by almost 2,400 gigawatts, with global coal consumption expected to plateau by 2025.<sup>11</sup> China is regarded as holding the greatest leverage when it comes to reversing the trend. For years, the government in Beijing has been expanding its capacities in the field of renewables and is the undisputed world leader in terms of total installed solar and wind capacity. The country also dominates the market for renewable electricity production plants and in many cases holds a monopoly position when it comes to the critical raw materials required for clean tech products.<sup>12</sup>

India is catching up in the expansion of renewables, too. By the end of 2022, the subcontinent had already reached fourth place with a total produced capacity (including hydropower) of 163 gigawatts, behind China (1,161 gigawatts), the United States (352 gigawatts) and Brazil (175 gigawatts). Germany ranked fifth with 148 gigawatts.<sup>13</sup> The expansion of renewables in India is expected to double in the course of the next five years,<sup>14</sup> an assumption that is borne out by announcements made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>15</sup> Yet at the same time, experts complain that decarbonisation in the energy-intensive sectors is not yet economically viable because the overall conditions for investments in renewables are inadequate.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, there is increasing pressure on

India and the other main emitters to switch to climate-neutral energy sources. More than 130 countries have committed to the goal of climate neutrality and must now back up this commitment by pursuing decarbonisation pathways. The so-called global stocktake is on the agenda of the forthcoming UN Climate Conference in Dubai (COP28): here, the shortcomings of the NDCs are to be addressed in order to remain within reach of the 1.5-degree target. But the path to climate neutrality in the high-emission emerging economies often has longer deadlines: while China and Indonesia are looking to achieve climate neutrality by 2060, India is giving itself time until 2070. What they all have in common is that the expansion of renewables is a key factor.

### Fossilisation, Decarbonisation, Polarisation?

The war in Ukraine has thus had a twofold impact. On the one hand, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are on the increase due to the worldwide “renaissance of coal” – and it is not only many of the emerging countries that are holding on to coal for the time being due to the imponderables of the energy supply situation. On the other hand, the war is fuelling the global expansion of renewables, thereby making wind and sun even more profitable. So the pendulum is swinging in the other direction, too: financial commitments for renewables reached 499 billion US dollars in 2022 – approximately 69 billion more than in the previous year.<sup>17</sup> Investments are unevenly distributed, however: China continues to account for the bulk of this development, although in East Asia, Vietnam has recently been conspicuous, too. Apart from the other usual suspects such as the United States, the EU and other industrialised countries, particularly high figures are also to be found in India, Chile and Brazil.<sup>18</sup> It is striking in this connection that Sub-Saharan Africa is falling behind – despite pioneers such as Kenya, whose share of renewable electricity production today comprises around 90 per cent of the total electricity mix, and South Africa, the investment magnet in southern Africa. Africa’s LDCs in particular are being given a wide berth: an average of

only 0.84 per cent of global investment went to these countries between 2013 and 2020.<sup>19</sup> This may also be due to the fact that they have other more pressing problems at present: there are currently around 590 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa who still have no access to electricity at all, for example.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Francesco La Camera, Director-General of the International Renewable Energy Agency, is calling on governments and development partners to play a more active role in ensuring a more equitable flow of finance that takes greater account of the differing contexts in the different countries.<sup>21</sup>

In developing countries, too, renewable energy and fossil fuels are frequently being developed at the same time. Green hydrogen is soon to be produced in Mauritania, an African desert state that ranks towards the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI). Yet gas fields have been discovered there that are to be exploited for export, too. So it is fitting when, at the height of the energy crisis in Europe, Chancellor Olaf Scholz courted Senegal on his trip to Africa in an attempt to establish cooperation in the use of gas resources and his Minister of Economic Affairs enthused about prosperity through green value chains in Namibia while at the same time having LNG terminals built in Germany. Admittedly, there need be no contradiction in the use of natural gas as a transition technology on the road to decarbonisation. Gas exports also provide developing countries with a source of revenue that can be channelled into their own development, and there are those that advocate the use of this energy source to drive local industrialisation.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Germany's manoeuvring reveals an ambivalence in its climate policy, underpinning the impression in many emerging and developing countries that the EU, and Germany in particular, are "preaching water but drinking wine".

It was not possible to overcome this reservation at this year's Petersberg Climate Dialogue either. On the contrary: this line of conflict appears to be reinforced in the debate surrounding the role of technologies for carbon

capture and storage (CCS) in connection with climate action. Germany and the Europeans were disconcerted by designated COP28 President Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber's call for a phase-out of "fossil emissions" – as opposed to fossil energies. That wording is regarded by climate activists as a back door for the extended use of fossil energies, whose emissions would then be neutralised by CCS technologies, which, however, are still hardly available in emerging countries. The German government advocated the setting of a binding expansion target for renewable energies, once again speaking out in favour of the end of fossil fuels.<sup>23</sup>

But since many developing countries are well aware of the new debate that has been sparked in Germany and Brussels, in which CC(U)S (carbon capture (utilisation) and storage) is being proposed as one element contributing to a climate-neutral and competitive industry, the Europeans' demands seemed one-sided to them. This impression was reinforced by the G7's rather vague commitment to accelerating the phase-out of "unabated fossil fuels" without setting out a concrete roadmap with interim targets up until 2050.<sup>24</sup>

### **Concerns about energy supply security have come to the fore since the start of Russia's war of aggression.**

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This ambivalence plays into Beijing's hands: it is in China's interest to fuel mistrust of the Western industrialised countries in order to secure loyalty among the countries of the Global South. At the same time, China's efforts are also falling on fertile ground since the industrialised countries are already struggling with a credibility problem now that their promise of climate financing worth 100 billion US dollars has been broken several times. In view of this, it is not surprising that India, for economic reasons, does not find it reprehensible to obtain cheap coal and oil from Russia despite Western sanctions on the latter.<sup>25</sup>

Climate neutrality remains the common goal of the international community, and there is growing pressure on the main emitters to do more about it. Nonetheless, concerns about energy supply security have come to the fore since the start of Russia's war of aggression. In Germany in particular, the hitherto prevailing idealised image of a world of renewables is now becoming broader – based on the realisation that, given international links and dependencies, more weight needs to be given to geopolitical considerations in shaping climate action partnerships.

### **Sustainability and Values – Added Value or Hindrance?**

#### *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)*

The Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) initiated by the United States at the G7 Summit in June 2022 makes no secret of its political thrust. In connection with this initiative, which is essentially a 600-billion-dollar loan programme running until 2027 to finance infrastructure projects in developing countries in the areas of climate, global health, gender equality and connectivity, the White House made it clear that it is about a “values-driven, high-impact, and transparent infrastructure partnership” that will meet the enormous demand in middle-income and low-income countries.<sup>26</sup> The partnership was launched in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with which Beijing has been promoting infrastructure projects worldwide since 2013. While opinions differ as to whether China is deliberately lending to weak economies in order to drive them into dependency (“debt diplomacy”), it is undisputed that this instrument is an essential part of China's foreign policy agenda and serves to expand its influence in the world.

In view of this, Washington has come to newly appreciate the value of cooperating with developing countries, especially in Africa.<sup>27</sup> Supported by the G7 members and the EU, the partnership promises “game-changing deals”.

The aim is to “deliver quality, sustainable infrastructure that makes a difference in people's lives around the world, strengthens and diversifies our supply chains”.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it is about accountable institutions, standards, clean tech and job creation. But it is still too early to say whether the PGII is the answer to the huge demand for investment and infrastructure in developing countries. Since the US-led G7 initiative is dependent on the mobilisation of private capital, the first task in many countries will be to establish the necessary framework and capacity for bankable projects and to reduce capital costs. In order to stand up to China effectively, the announcement of the undertaking needs to be swiftly followed up by implementation.

### **The EU's Global Gateway strategy is intended to offer alternatives to the Chinese model of cooperation for the countries of the Global South.**

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This also applies to the broad-based EU connectivity strategy Global Gateway, which aims to mobilise up to 300 billion euros for investment between 2021 and 2027: with sustainability being elevated to a guiding principle here, too, and the primary goal being to help developing and emerging countries build the urgently needed transport, energy and digital infrastructure, this also seems to be about ensuring that the countries of the Global South are offered alternatives to the Chinese model of cooperation.

#### *Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP)*

Supported by a group of Western countries and the EU, the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) likewise takes a values-based approach. Unlike PGII and Global Gateway, JETP focuses on the energy policy sector and strives for a just transition. The first partnership with South Africa was agreed on at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow on the initiative of

Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the EU. The primary goal is to help the country phase out coal. A socially compatible transition is an essential aspect of this partnership as almost 90 per cent of South Africa's electricity comes from coal. The coal industry is a relevant economic sector and a key employer in the country. For this reason, guidelines for change are to address specific issues such as job creation, with a focus on social groups in need.<sup>29</sup>

Consultation processes are to involve civil society, academia and trade unions, but NGOs feel that this has not been successful in all areas.<sup>30</sup> The centrepiece of the partnership is the investment plan proposed by South Africa, which was officially adopted by the G7 countries at the UN Climate Change Conference in Egypt. Using various financing instruments and private capital, more than 8.5 billion US dollars are now to be mobilised (Germany is contributing 700 million euros and has recently pledged another 320 million). But since the country itself estimated the funding requirements for the transition to be many times higher, South Africa's president called for more subsidies and low-cost loans rather than loans at market rates.<sup>31</sup> Given the enormous financing needs in South Africa and indeed elsewhere in the Global South, too, it is equally evident that public funds alone will not be able to fix the problem.

### **A key success factor of decarbonisation will certainly be social acceptance.**

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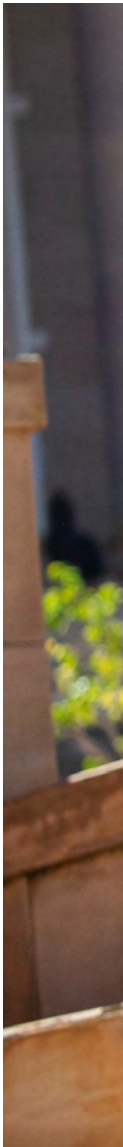
Despite the criticism, the partnership initiative has already set a precedent for other countries: in addition to Indonesia, which adopted a JETP at the G20 Summit in Bali, there is also an agreement with Vietnam. Although negotiations are still ongoing with India and Senegal, differences between the partnerships are already beginning to emerge. While in South Africa it was possible to tie in with existing decarbonisation plans, it

remains to be seen whether this will succeed in the other countries as well. A key success factor will certainly be social acceptance of the reform process. This is the case in South Africa, for example, where people's dissatisfaction with the country's inadequate electricity supply is a major driver of change. These kinds of endogenous factors can sometimes be crucial in determining whether fundamental reforms have the potential to succeed since they focus on the accountability of the country's own decision-makers.

At the same time, decarbonisation in emerging economies depends on other factors such as a sufficient and affordable supply of the critical raw materials needed for clean tech: according to World Bank forecasts, demand in this area – for example for lithium – is expected to increase exponentially by 2050 as global climate action progresses.<sup>32</sup> Since the Russian war of aggression has made dependence on Chinese raw material supplies a political issue too, especially in the Western industrialised countries – approaches to diversifying raw material supply chains can already be seen in the United States as part of the Inflation Reduction Act passed in August 2022 and in the EU in the form of the planned Net-Zero Industry Act – it is important to link this to a secure, clean and affordable supply of raw materials in the context of climate partnerships such as the JETPs, too. For example, India is supposed to harbour significant amounts of Lithium. Nevertheless, further explorations will be required to ascertain the projects' economic rentability. At the same time, there are open questions about environmental risks, political stability and how large the reserves actually are.

### **Carbon Leakage and CBAM: Two Sides of the Same Coin**

The EU and Germany regard one of the key issues in relation to global decarbonisation as being the phenomenon of carbon leakage, i.e. the outsourcing of production and the migration of companies to countries with lower climate standards that do not require emissions trading certificates, for example, in order to



take advantage of cost benefits. Potentially, this could not only result in an increase in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but also risks exacerbating international competitive disadvantages for European business and industry in energy-intensive sectors. For this reason, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) adopted in Brussels in December 2022 is designed to prevent the above-mentioned effects in the wake of rising CO<sub>2</sub> prices.

Even though the mechanism initially only covers energy-intensive economic and industrial sectors such as the steel industry, for instance, the CBAM was viewed critically by the emerging economies even at an early stage. The BRICS countries in particular have repeatedly expressed their rejection of the mechanism – most recently at the UN Climate Change Conference through the group of so-called Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC).<sup>33</sup> India, whose metals



German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz visiting South African President Ramaphosa in Pretoria: Since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Germany has increased its coal imports from South Africa, while at the same time supporting its partner in its decarbonisation efforts. Photo: © Kim Ludbrook, epa, picture alliance.

industry would be heavily affected by the mechanism, warned that the decision could affect negotiations on the free trade agreement with the EU.<sup>34</sup> LMDC member Vietnam must now also do more to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> product share in future, and this is true to an even greater extent of China. Goods worth 626 billion euros were imported by the EU in 2022.<sup>35</sup> Some experts point out that the impact of the CBAM will nevertheless be limited because only a fraction of Chinese exports fall within the relevant sectors.<sup>36</sup> And they believe there will be positive opportunities, too: China has operated its own emissions trading system in the electricity sector since 2020 and is now planning to extend this to other sectors, for example. Here, pressure from the CBAM could speed up implementation.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Climate Club's goals include “transforming industries jointly to accelerate decarbonisation”.**

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Emerging economies such as India have also increased the pace of reform in recent times, passing a law in 2022 to establish national emissions trading, among other things. There is a catch, however: the systems are currently not very compatible with the EU emissions trading system. While in China the CO<sub>2</sub> price per tonne is far below that in the EU and the difference in price is thus too high to derive any significant benefit for the global climate, the other projects are only just getting under way. The clash with India has recently intensified, with New Delhi now considering imposing retaliatory tariffs on EU imports as a potential response to the CBAM.<sup>38</sup> It remains to be seen whether Brussels will succeed in smoothing the waters. It is not least against this background that an EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was recently launched.

After a monitoring phase starting in October 2023, the CBAM is due to officially enter into force in 2026. Border adjustment is an essential part of the Fit for 55 reform package to

advance European emissions trading (EU ETS), and the ETS is essential for the EU to meet its climate targets. At present, the EU ETS covers about 40 per cent of total emissions in the EU. By 2030, emissions in the ETS sectors have to be reduced by 62 per cent compared with 2005. The mechanism is to be extended to cover buildings and transport by 2027 (ETS 2).<sup>39</sup> In terms of the frequently invoked level playing field, the border adjustment mechanism appears indispensable in the transition phase from an EU perspective, so trade conflicts with countries such as India are inevitable.

### **Climate Club – An End to Divergence?**

Not least in order to defuse these controversies, the German government proposed the establishment of a Climate Club during the German G7 presidency. This would involve “transforming industries jointly to accelerate decarbonisation” while at the same time “expanding markets for green industrial products”.<sup>40</sup> Little action has been taken to date, however. Although the G7 statement on the Climate Club mentions “explicit carbon pricing, other mitigation approaches and carbon intensities”, it has little to say about the instruments and concrete objectives – possibly also because the G7 countries have differing ideas on these issues.<sup>41</sup> At the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference, Chancellor Scholz again made an attempt to promote the Climate Club, emphasising that it was open to emerging economies. While Kenya recently expressed its support for membership, persuading key emitters such as India and China to join will be crucial if the club is to be truly effective.

The difficulty here is that as the club becomes more inclusive, it will become more heterogeneous due to the differing situations in the various countries, which in turn could make it more difficult to arrive at concrete agreements. While some experts advocate the creation of common product standards or rules for climate-neutral products rather than common CO<sub>2</sub> pricing, others see the greatest potential in the coordination of national climate measures. One point that is common to all the proposals is that the

involvement of emerging economies is essential to the success of the undertaking in order to substantially reduce global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions while at the same time avoiding competitive subsidising to promote clean tech, as well as protectionist measures – which would ultimately be detrimental to the global climate. Essentially, the aim must be to take into account the needs on both sides – industrialised nations and emerging economies – and to use incentive systems to encourage the adoption of climate standards and the development of CO<sub>2</sub> pricing systems.<sup>42</sup>

The idea of expanding the planned Climate Club to form a Global Climate Alliance and focussing on sectors such as steel and cement production in the initial phase is a step in the right direction. But whether or not cooperation can develop under such an alliance will depend on the extent to which the industrialised countries will be in a position (financially) to bear the costs of aligning climate standards in the Global South in times of multiple global crises and at the same time helping to mobilise sufficient investment. Moreover, emerging economies would have to be willing to accept rigorous benchmarks and establish transparent monitoring to advance decarbonisation in key sectors.

**Given its own ambivalence with regard to climate policy, Germany must also allow its partners greater flexibility in the transition to a climate-neutral energy supply.**

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**Conclusion**

1. Cooperation with China on global climate action is and will remain essential in view of the country's enormous carbon footprint. Despite international tensions, it is vital that options for climate policy cooperation continue to be explored on an ongoing basis.

However, China's classification as a developing country no longer seems appropriate in this connection: a reassessment is urgently needed. Involving the country in a global climate alliance is a potential option here. At the same time, cooperation with India and the other emerging countries under the various climate cooperation models must be advanced, and agreements concluded swiftly.

2. In view of Russia's war of aggression, both energy security and climate action have to be taken into account to a greater extent when establishing collaborative platforms, and these must also be linked to a secure, clean and affordable supply of raw materials. Given its own ambivalence with regard to climate policy, Germany must also allow its partners greater flexibility in the transition to a climate-neutral energy supply. Despite the expansion of renewables, coal remains a relevant component of the electricity supply for the time being in many emerging countries and also currently acts as a kind of guarantee to guard against the energy policy uncertainties caused by the Russian war of aggression; Germany should therefore weigh up its demands for a global coal phase-out more carefully, expand partnerships in the Global South and also be open to the responsible use of CCS technologies in those countries.
3. Value orientation and sustainability in the climate partnerships pursued by Germany, the EU and the G7 countries with developing and emerging countries can offer advantages over the models offered by Beijing, but only as long as the partnerships promise the population of the partner country a concrete benefit that is geared towards their own economic development – and are not perceived as an externally imposed condition, let alone an obstacle. Multi-stakeholder dialogues can help involve all relevant groups beyond the government elites, thereby including differing perspectives on the energy transition. As the underlying conditions for this kind of dialogue may be lacking in

developing countries, partnerships should also address the necessary political reforms and jointly advance them based on governance designed for this purpose and anchored in the country's own structures.

*- translated from German -*

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