

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NEUTRALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE IN TWO GLOBAL SOUTH COUNTRIES DURING THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

Camila Bailey and Talia Nanton

a.c.bailey@lse.ac.uk and t.nanton@alumni.lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Following the Russian attacks on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, two media outlets in Brazil and South Africa—Folha de São Paulo (Folha) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)—closely covered the events and effects of the attacks on both international politics and global markets. Where countries such as the United States were quick to condemn Russia's actions, both Folha and SABC avoided such critical language. The media's resulting narratives, which heavily centered on the impact of the war on domestic issues, are extensions of Brazil and South Africa's diplomatic decision to remain neutral in the War in Ukraine, even amid calls by the West to condemn the actions of the Russian government. This paper dives deeper into Brazil and South Africa's geopolitical relations with non-Western countries during the impetus of the War in Ukraine to understand the media's framing on the issue as a strategic tool for self-preservation and diplomatic gains, although not without consequences.

Introduction

In the months that followed the February 24 Russian invasion of Ukraine, today's increasingly interconnected world immediately felt the repercussions of the attacks and the ensuing war. Global markets suffered, supply-chains were disrupted, and tensions escalated in international relations as governments abroad navigated their national response to the crisis. Russia's invasion inflicted insurmountable suffering to the Ukrainian people and launched a humanitarian crisis that had not been seen in Europe for decades.

The international diplomatic response to the Ukraine War was largely led by a Western narrative condemning the Russian invasion of neighboring Ukraine. For media consumers within the U.K., the U.S., and their closest allies, the positioning of Russia as an aggressive attacker was the dominant view received.¹ However, away from the Western mainstream media, other geopolitical perspectives begin to appear that contradict this narrative.² While direct anti-Russia rhetoric has been the norm in Western media² since the onset of the conflict, by shifting focus to non-Western journalism outlets, it becomes evident that the global narrative is much more complex. What's more, by ignoring the nuances within these contrasting views, the Western public is at risk of viewing non-Western countries as misguided in their diplomatic decision-making, reinforcing the notion that the Global South must fall in line with its former colonial powers³. Media representations of the War in Ukraine from the perspective of the Global South demonstrate the complex variables that affect a country's response. Rather than labeling the Global South's neutrality as wrong, it is important to understand that these developing countries

¹ Gideon Rachman, "Why the global south won't take sides on Ukraine," *The Financial Times*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/9a2e1947-6870-4d88-81dc-a38e126393ad>.

² David Adler, "The west v Russia: why the global south isn't taking sides," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/10/russia-ukraine-west-global-south-sanctions-war>.

³ Ranabir Samaddar, "The right to be neutral," *360info*, May 24, 2022, <https://360info.org/the-right-to-be-neutral>.

are guided by motivators not readily understood by the West or western audiences without a closer examination.³

This paper uses geopolitical relationships and multilateral economic ties to attempt to understand how the global power of the West functioned as a deterrent for Brazil and South Africa during the onset of the War, and how their own country's wellbeing may or may not have superseded this. This analysis occurs alongside the considerations of the COVID-19 pandemic and its unparalleled and ongoing impact on the Global South.⁴

We begin with an explanation of the key terms 'Neutrality,' 'Global South', 'Global North' and 'the West', followed by the methodology of our analysis and our findings from the research. A section on the colonial histories of Brazil and South Africa, and background on the countries' geopolitical relationships and diplomatic ties follows. This, we believe, provides the reader with the contextual information necessary to better understand the paper's analysis, and the histories that have shaped Brazil and South Africa today. From there, the paper will briefly discuss how the West reacted to the neutral position of Brazil and South Africa before we discuss what this position might tell us about a shifting global stage. The paper concludes with further discussion of the two countries' resistance to Western pressures, the media's representation of this defiance, and how this narrative legitimizes neutrality in the Global South.

Key Terms: Neutrality, the West, Global South and Global North

The concept of neutrality, both in its practical and historical usage, is heavily exemplified by discussion of its adoption during the Cold War. In an effort to define neutrality in the current era, beyond the simple definition of "not taking part in a war," Agius and Devine examine the term's

⁴ Dave Lawlor, "The world isn't lining up behind the West against Russia," *Axios*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/05/world-not-united-ukraine-response-isolate-russia>.

increasing distance from its “Cold-War baggage” and the development of its use since the 1990s.⁵ Although mindful of the importance of neutrality’s definition “because [of] the variation in meaning...scope...and, at times, certain descriptors,” in its different applications, for this paper, neutrality is positioned most closely with concepts of non-alignment. In this way, neutrality derives “from the context of the Cold War” and evolves to mean “avoiding entanglement in superpower conflicts.” (Agius & Devine, 2011, 270) Dadabaev and Sonoda consider what we define as “strategic neutrality” to be “strategic silence” or the approach, they argue, taken by Central Asian states during the Ukraine War.⁶ While we contend that there is an element of silence, or “restrained reactio[n] to Russia’s war against Ukraine” at times by both Brazilian and South African governments, we acknowledge in our definition of “strategic neutrality” the actions, by both nations, that specifically facilitate a continued diplomatic relationship with Russia, despite pressure or expressed displeasure from the West (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2023).

The West, Global South and Global North

McNeil writes that an understanding of the West is entirely dependent on “who is invoking the term and for what purpose.”⁷ (1997, 514). In this paper, we use the West to mean the United States and the European core, which McNeil considers to be “the major player” in conceptualizations of the West. (1997, 522)

⁵ Christine Agius and Karen Devine. “‘Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?’ A Reprise.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084643>.

⁶ Timur Dadabaev and Shigeto Sonoda. "Silence is golden? Silences as strategic narratives in Central Asian states' response to the Ukrainian crisis." *International Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2023): 193-215.

⁷ William H. McNeil, “What we mean by the west,” *Western Civ in World Politics* 41, Issue 4, (1997): 513-524, ISSN 0030-4387, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387\(97\)90002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387(97)90002-8).

Sebastian Haug notes that ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’ have become “staple terminology” in conversations on world politics and global affairs as a way to center a specific region.⁸ Thus it becomes important to adequately explain the boundaries of these terms in order to understand the areas they’re referencing. As much as ‘the West’ is a varying definition, so too have the ‘Global South’ and ‘North’ come to function as “a general rubric for decolonised nations roughly south of the old colonial centres of power,” Staub writes. Even so, two commonly held concepts of the ‘Global South,’ across varying definitions, prove helpful for understanding the term in this specific context. These understandings of the ‘Global South’ have been particularly prevalent in the analysis of world politics.

First, Staub understands the ‘Global South’ as largely referring to “poor and/or socio-economically marginalised parts of the world,” especially as countries who have recently been decolonized. Second, Staub says the “‘Global South’ has stood for cross-regional and multilateral alliances,” especially those “with platforms and cooperation practices beyond those dominated by former colonial powers.” In this context, we connect this idea to the alliance formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, or BRICS as it has commonly been termed.⁹

Methodology

Working with the London School of Economics on a research project entitled, “Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge: Global Media Narratives of the Russia-Ukraine War” in the Spring of 2022, we examined articles from *Folha de São Paulo (Folha)* and the *South Africa Broadcasting*

⁸ Sebastian Haug, “The ‘Global South’ and research on world politics,” *The Loop*, (2020), <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-global-south-and-research-on-world-politics/>

⁹ Yvonne Dooley, “BRICS: Sources of Information,” Library of Congress, November 20, 2020, <https://guides.loc.gov/brics>.

Corporation (SABC) that mention Ukraine from the first three weeks of the conflict, Feb. 24, 2022-March 14, 2022.¹⁰ Due to time constraints and the breadth of available information, within the available corpus of 100 articles, those published on Thursday, Friday, or Monday were selected and analyzed qualitatively for a total of 60 articles. After collecting the data, we examined the results through the lens of the overlapping colonial contexts of South Africa and Brazil. When analyzing the corpus, we considered the story's setting; the causes or consequences of the war discussed such as triggers, historical backgrounds, as well as solutions; the framing and language surrounding the war such as mention of aid, welfare, ideological influences, and economic consequences; the voices and actors within the story; and the emotions infused into the article. The sampled articles were then cross-examined with coverage from U.S. media narratives, juxtaposing the Western representation of the Ukraine-Russia conflict with those of South Africa and Brazil.

The primary analytical tools for this research stem from Rosalind Gill's practical implementation of discourse analysis.¹¹ Stuart Hall's conceptualization of representation and its ability to connect meaning and language to a culture is also applied, as is his interpretation of language as indicative of cultural understandings of the world.¹² Using discourse analysis to better understand the two selected media outlets and their coverage of news for domestic audiences, we apply Hall's concepts, which uses a definition of shared culture that means a set of shared meanings or conceptual maps. (1997, 4) As such, our discourse analysis involves both

¹⁰ Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, "Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge, European Communication Research and Education Association, June 20, 2022, <https://ecrea.eu/page-18206/12810893>.

¹¹ Rosalind Gill, "Discourse Analysis: Practical Implementation" in *Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences*, ed. John T.E. Richardson, (Leicester: British Psychological Society, 1996), 141-158.

¹² Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation" in *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 1-47.

“analysing discourse and [sic] analysing the interpretive contexts;” here, the political and diplomatic contexts.

The selected texts were kept in their untranslated forms—Portuguese for *Folha* and English for *SABC*—ensuring that analysis would be conducted in the original language or, as Hall considers language, “the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning.” (Hall, 1996, 4) Importantly, as Gill emphasizes in her breakdown of discourse analysis, it is imperative to the practice that the focus is not on social realities but “the ways in which accounts are constructed and the functions they perform.” (Gill, 1996, 144)

Hall’s constructionist approach to encountering meaning in language grounded the “Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge” research project, which worked to understand the relationship between communication, global politics, and war by examining the role of national media outlets in shaping the global conversation around war. (LSE, 2022) Using his approach, the meaning interpreted from the selected texts were shaped based on the language used to communicate these ideas and representations, rather than simply the material world as it stands. (1997) As Hall notes, “It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.” (Hall, 1997, 4) In this context, we see the Brazilian and South African governments, as well as the media outlets themselves, as the primary social actors constructing these meanings. (Hall, 1997)

As Hall explains, the constructionist theory suggests “a complex and mediated relationship between things in the world, our concepts in thought and language.” Thus, the way both ideas are suggested or conceptualized are largely governed by our culture and language which, together, produces the meaning we takeaway (Hall, 1997). Gill provides additional words

on constructionist theory that prove helpful here, arguing, “we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a way that is somehow ‘direct’ or unmediated...texts of various kinds construct our world.” (Gill, 1996)

Using Hall’s constructionist approach to representation, the interpreted media frames were seen to reflect the strategic positioning of South Africa and Brazil as politically neutral in the Ukraine conflict, as a diplomatic tool for the two countries’ self-preservation.

Similar to “Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge,” this analysis works to evaluate how the international media’s coverage of recent wars, and their discursive production of knowledge informs and legitimizes practice in global politics. (LSE, 2022) The interdisciplinary character of the seminar and of the case studies of media from Western and non-Western traditions brings together conceptual and theoretical strands from multiple disciplines: media and communications, history, politics, war studies, and migration studies.

Even so, as Gill notes, “our own discourse as discourse analysts is no less constructed [...] than the discourse we are studying” (1996, 145) and our own biases and established sociocultural construct will inherently intrude the analysis process, despite our best attempts at a unbiased examination of the selected world.

Strategic Neutrality in the Media

While conducting the “Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge” study, we encountered several frames that characterized how Brazil and South Africa were able to strategically leverage domestic media outlets to shape a national understanding of neutrality or strategic neutral positioning within the context of the war. Through a domestic-centered approach, both countries, through

their respective news outlets, presented and at times justified an attitude of non-involvement, choosing to report on the potential social and economic repercussions of the conflict instead.

Thirty-two percent of the sampled articles were economically driven, with 42% of articles from *Folha* alone published under the outlet's 'Economy' section including "Oil rises above \$105 [USD per barrel] after Russian invasion of Ukraine"¹³ and "Vale sees tightening of pellet market and higher prices with war in Ukraine."¹⁴ Rising food costs dominated South African news media as well in headlines such as, "Russia-Ukraine conflict likely to cause some food prices to increase."¹⁵ In other examples, the country's dependence on Russia and Ukraine for essential goods and materials was emphasized: "How Russia-Ukraine conflict could influence Africa's food supplies." (Sharafedin, Chow, & Tan, 2022)

Throughout the "invasion" of Ukraine, a term used in more than one *SABC* article during the time period covered within our research, the South African government routinely "doubled down" on its historic commitment to neutrality, emphasizing that the nation, "should not be told by anyone who [it] can associate with..."¹⁶ Moreover, President Ramaphosa refers to South Africa's dedicated commitment to peaceful mediation as the approach that facilitated an end to the apartheid regime.¹⁷ SA's decision to abstain from the UN Security Council vote to condemn

¹³ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Emily Chow, and Florence Tan, "Petróleo passa de US\$ 105 após invasão russa à Ucrânia," *Folha de São Paulo*, Feb 24, 2022, www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2022/02/petroleo-sobe-acima-de-us-105-apos-invasao-russa-a-ucrania.shtml.

¹⁴ Nicola Pamplona, Vale vê aperto no mercado de pelotas e preços mais altos com guerra na Ucrânia, *Folha de São Paulo*, Feb. 25, 2022, www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2022/02/vale-ve-aperto-no-mercado-de-pelotas-e-precos-mais-altos-com-guerra-na-ucrania.shtml.

¹⁵ SABC News, "Russia-Ukraine conflict likely to cause some food items' prices to increase in SA : Sihlobo," *South Africa Broadcasting Corporation*, Feb. 24, 2022, <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/russia-ukraine-conflict-likely-to-cause-some-food-items-prices-to-increase-in-sa-sihlobo/>.

¹⁶ Nosmot Gbadamosi, "In Washington, Cyril Ramaphosa Defends South African Neutrality," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/21/ramaphosa-biden-meeting-south-africa-neutrality-climate>.

¹⁷ Risha Maduray, "More engagement is required from UN Security Council over Russia-Ukraine conflict: Ramaphosa." *SABC News*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/more-engagement-is-required-from-un-security-council-over-russia-ukraine-conflict-ramaphosa/>.

Russia on March 2, 2022 was, according to Ramaphosa, “because [the UN] did not call for meaningful engagement that would end the conflict” (Maduray, 2022). Similarly, then Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, while discussing a February 16, 2022 meeting with President Vladimir Putin, declared, “I told Putin that Brazil supports any country that seeks peace. And that's his intention.”¹⁸ Later that same month, three days after the start of the war, Bolsonaro told reporters during a press conference, “We are not going to take sides. We are going to continue to be neutral and help however possible to find a solution.” (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2023)

Colonial Context

Saunders and Seekings challenge the consideration of South Africa as having successfully maintained a neutral stance in their diplomacy through the country’s refusal to take part in the UN Security Council’s March vote to condemn Russia’s actions. According to the authors, this refusal is instead evidence of the ambivalence of the South African government.¹⁹ They argue that this response is “deeply worrying,” stating, “Democratic South Africa appeared supportive of the imperial, undemocratic Russia over the democratic West.” (Gbadamosi, 2022) They question the foreign policy of South Africa and other, similarly positioned countries, stating its professed nonalignment is misleading because “these countries have clearly been more critical of Western countries (and Ukraine) than of Russia.” (SABC, Feb. 25, 2022) Others concur. Ghincea

¹⁸ Anthony Boadle, Lisandra Paraguassu, & Rosalba O'Brien, “Bolsonaro says he told Putin Brazil supports peaceful end to Ukraine crisis,” *Reuters*, Feb. 16, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/bolsonaro-says-brazil-keen-russian-nuclear-reactors-no-mention-ukraine-2022-02-16.

¹⁹ Seekings, Jeremy, and Chris Saunders. "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Future of Democracy in South Africa." *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 44, no. 1 (2022), 115-131.

attributes the professed non alignment of Brazil's response to its domestic political "contestation" or "competing political factions" that have underscored its foreign policy.²⁰

While all of the articles published by *SABC* were written by staff reporters, the outlet's decision to republish an article on its website, within the first few weeks of the war, that discusses possible historical and colonial contexts surrounding South Africa's decision to take a neutral position is notable. The article titled, "History may explain South Africa's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine" published originally by *The Conversation*, an online American news source, explores the relevancy of the historical relationship between the Soviet Union and South Africa to the position, or lack thereof, taken by the nation in response to the war.²¹

SABC and *Folha*'s framing of the West's actions against Russia following the initial attack on Ukraine were critical in tone; although neither outlet directly condemned the West for imposing sanctions against Russia. In one instance, both outlets described the restrictions placed on the nation as "unprecedented";²² a "brutal" reaction by the West. Often, the descriptions of these sanctions seemed more concerned with the effects that the sanctions would have (i.e. a "crushing blow") on Russia's "already flailing economy."²³ South Africa and Brazil's respective governments provided their own criticism that was quoted in the outlets, particularly focusing on the possible effects "punishing" Russia might have on their own economies and economic relations. In one article, President Bolsonaro is quoted making remarks against "any sanctions

²⁰ Ghincea, Marius. "Afterword: The Russo-Ukrainian War and Great Power Competition." In *Great Powers' Foreign Policy*, (Netherlands: Brill, 2022), 472-492.

²¹ Keith Gottschalk, "History may explain South Africa's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *The Conversation*, March 11, 2022, theconversation.com/history-may-explain-south-africas-refusal-to-condemn-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-178657.

²² *SABC News*, "Fingers crossed for Russia-Ukraine peace talks to work," *SABC News*, (Feb. 28, 2022). <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/fingers-crossed-for-russia-ukraine-peace-talks-to-work/>.

²³ Sherwin Bryce-Pease, "Biden makes moves to cripple Russian economy," *SABC News*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/biden-makes-moves-to-cripple-russian-economy/>.

that could bring negative repercussions for Brazil, citing Russian fertilizers which are crucial for the country's giant agribusiness sector.”²⁴ Brazil’s continued “expressed discomfort with the use of force and international sanctions, [works] to maintain neutrality and leverage great power competition to its advantage.”²⁵

Brazil’s position of neutrality can be traced back to the Cold War where it took a neutral stance against the Soviet Union as a result of a diplomatic relationship that began in the early 19th century.²⁶ The South American country worked to establish greater diplomatic ties with what was then “the Communist world forming close relationships with African and Asian and other neutralist countries.”²⁷ By working closely with non-western countries such as those that would later form the BRICS group, Brazil was able to develop alternative forums on which to gain a more powerful “voice for developing countries on the world stage.”²⁸

Before apartheid ended, the Soviet Union provided the highest funding to the African National Congress (ANC); a relationship beginning in 1927.²⁹ For a decade, the Soviet Union offered supplemental “training in conventional warfare” while the United States worked to undermine the ANC, designating them as “terrorists” and contributing to South Africa’s disillusionment with the Global North. (Gottschalk, 2022) Put frankly, *openDemocracy East*

²⁴ Gabriel Stargardt, “Bolsonaro won't condemn Putin, says Brazil will remain neutral over invasion,” *Reuters*, Feb. 27, 2022, [reuters.com/world/bolsonaro-wont-condemn-putin-says-brazil-will-remain-neutral-over-invasion-2022-02-27](https://www.reuters.com/world/bolsonaro-wont-condemn-putin-says-brazil-will-remain-neutral-over-invasion-2022-02-27).

²⁵ Fernando Brancoli, “War in Ukraine and Elections in Brazil,” The Wilson Center, March 25, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/war-ukraine-and-elections-brazil>.

²⁶ Bandeira, Luiz Alberto Moniz. “Brazil as a regional power and its relations with the United States.” *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 3 (2006): 12-27.

²⁷ Ted Szluc, “Brazil Follows a Neutral Path; Takes Middle Course in ‘Cold War,’ While Seeking to Keep Close U.S. Ties,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 26, 1961, <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/02/26/archives/brazil-follows-a-neutral-path-takes-middle-course-in-cold-war-while.html>.

²⁸ Diana Roy, “Brazil’s Global Ambitions,” The Council on Foreign Relations, Sept. 19, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/brazils-global-ambitions>.

²⁹ Keith Gottschalk, “History may explain South Africa’s refusal to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” *The Conversation*, March 11, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/history-may-explain-south-africas-refusal-to-condemn-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-1786>

Africa reporter Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu considers, “All African countries (apart from Ethiopia and Liberia) were colonized, our homes cut up and shared like cake among European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 and in later years[...]No African country was ever colonized by members of the former USSR.”³⁰

Southern African governments have also demonstrated a “shared resentment for the dominance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and international alliances, especially that between the US and former colonial powers – the UK and French.”³¹ In response to South Africa’s decision to abstain from the UN vote against Russia—a move made by two other Global South nations: India and China—the United States government fell largely silent on its critique. However, American news outlets expressly communicated how “surprising” it was for South Africa to vote in opposition to the West. (Rogers, 2023) Only recently, more than a year since the start of the war, have a number of articles begun to focus on why it fails to be “surprising” at all, given the Global South’s closest diplomatic relations. The United States has since then castigated South Africa for continuing with its plan to hold joint naval exercises with Russia and China in February 2023.³²

Our research found that Brazil and South Africa’s media representations of the Western response depicted actors “as aggressive and acting alone.” (LSE, 2022) According to these representations, there was no external support as the US coordinated with its closest allies, the

³⁰ Paul Rogers, “The West is wrong to assume it has global support in the war against Putin,” *openDemocracy*, Feb. 11, 2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/russia-ukraine-war-arms-trade-global-south-colonialism-perspective/>

³¹ SABC News, “South Africa: History May Explain Pretoria's Refusal to Condemn Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,” *South Africa Broadcasting Corporation*, March 15, 2022, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202203160145.html>.

³² Kate Bartlett, “South Africa Criticized for Hosting Russian Warships Amid Ukraine War,” *Voice of America*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-africa-criticized-for-hosting-russian-warships-amid-ukraine-war-/6923375.html>.

G7 and EU nations, “to punish Moscow for its military aggression in Ukraine.”³³ Comments made by current Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva refer to an opposition to American imperialism as “the classic stance of [Lula’s] Workers’ Party, of the Latin American left.”³⁴ In another statement he says, “[The Workers’ Party has] a very binary view of this[...siding] with whoever is against the U.S. or, in this case, even NATO. They tend to be suspicious of American intentions.” (Kumar & Labbate, 2022) In May 2022, Lula made additional remarks which characterized the war as being at least partially the fault of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. This comment followed President Lula’s criticism of Russian President Putin earlier in March. For Nikhil Kumar and Mariana Labbate of the U.S. outlet, Grid News, both statements serve as President Lula’s way of stating, “‘Putin is wrong,’” while also fighting against U.S. imperialism.” (Kumar & Labbate, 2022) Neutrality, therefore, as demonstrated by South African and Brazilian media, “suggests networks engaged minimally with the Ukrainian people and casualties; evaded explicit indictment of Russia and Putin; focused on economic impacts; and negatively framed Western actions.” (LSE, 2022)

Journalist Trita Parsi, in conversations with diplomats and analysts across the Global South, found it to be evident “that these countries largely sympathize with the plight of the Ukrainian people and view Russia as the aggressor. But Western demands that they make costly sacrifices by cutting off economic ties with Russia to uphold a ‘rules-based order’ have undoubtedly been met with skepticism due to the West’s considerable history of violating

³³ Camila Bailey and Talia Nanton, “How Global South coverage of the Ukraine War sheds light on diplomatic neutrality: new research,” *Polis*, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2022/08/01/how-global-south-coverage-of-the-ukraine-war-sheds-light-on-diplomatic-neutrality-new-research/>.

³⁴ Nikhil Kumar and Mariana Labbate, “The war in Ukraine brought the West together. For the rest of the world, it’s complicated,” *The Messenger*, Nov. 11, 2022, <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/11/14/the-war-in-ukraine-brought-the-west-together-for-the-rest-of-the-world-its-complicated/>

international law ‘with impunity.’”³⁵ Other countries, she continues, in “citing the West’s history of imperialism and past failures to respect human rights, have justified opposing its response to Ukraine.”³⁶ This opposition however, may not be without consequence.

Russia’s role as a vocal adversary of the West thus presents South Africa and Brazil with an alternative to siding with their former colonizers. This draw to siding with Russia also increases when taking into account the country bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa or BRICS as the member group is referred to. The diplomatic ties between the countries were formally institutionalized in 2008 with South Africa officially joining in 2011.³⁷

BRICS

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa initially came together when they found themselves consistently excluded from global economic governance structures and Western institutions, Manjari Chatterjee Miller notes in a piece for *Foreign Policy*.³⁸ The bloc is made up of four of the largest economies in the world.³⁹ By joining together, Miller explains that the countries are able to better leverage this economic strength, while creating a geopolitical power

³⁵ Trita Parsi, “Why non-Western countries tend to see Russia’s war very, very differently,” MSNBC, April 11, 2022, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/ukraine-russia-war-looks-very-different-outside-west-n1294280>

³⁶ Ian Prasad Philbrick, “The ‘Messy Middle,’” The Morning, *New York Times*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/briefing/russian-invasion-response-world-sanctions.html>

³⁷ Alyssa Ayers, “How the BRICS Got Here,” The Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, Aug. 31, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/how-brics-got-here>.

³⁸ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, “Why BRICS Still Matters,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/27/brics-members-summit-brazil-russia-india-china-south-af-rica>.

³⁹ Peter Brennan, “COVID-19 magnifies BRICS divergence as China solidifies lead,” *S&P Global*, Nov. 5, 2020, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/covid-19-magnifies-brics-divergence-as-china-solidifies-lead-61053247>.

that, through BRICS, is much stronger than each of these emerging economies standing alone. (2021) In *Folha*'s reporting, they identify the bloc as "a safe haven" for multilateralism.⁴⁰

Despite the power BRICS affords its members, there are layers of geopolitical nuances that stand to affect the group's collaborative work. In order to address this, analyses of the BRICS nations suggest the bloc has developed strict principles that ensure conflicting issues of territorial disputes or regional and cultural sensitivities do not interfere in the function of the bloc. (Brennan, 2020) Additionally, although not every country shares the same geopolitical end goal, there is enough intersection for the group to develop a unified path towards reaching these individual goals, Miller explains. She uses the example of China and India's historical emphasis on independent sovereignty from the U.S. and Western governments and its similarity to Russia's general anti-U.S. stance. (2021)

Through our own research, we have identified a shared desire among BRICS member countries for the world to accord them a larger role on the global stage through an intersecting agenda focused on amplifying the need for emerging powers to have a greater voice in global governance. Alyssa Ayers, an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, provides one example when she points to BRICS' New Development Bank, and its Contingent Reserves Arrangement as an alternative "to institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and as an example of increasing South-South cooperation." (Ayers, 2017) In Brazil, *Folha* sees a surge in BRICS activity as creating the potential for Brazil to "accelerate its international reintegration," following Bolsonaro's isolationist policies (Alencastro, 2022).

⁴⁰ Mathias Alencastro, "Guerra da Ucrânia gerou outro desdobramento surpreendente: o ressurgimento do Brics," *Folha de São Paulo*, May 1, 2022, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/mathias-alencastro/2022/05/guerra-da-ucrania-gerou-outro-desdobramento-surpreendente-o-ressurgimento-do-brics.shtml>.

The bloc also creates stronger ties between member countries. In doing so, the five countries are able to collaborate on economic growth and domestic development with greater assurance that efforts will be mutually beneficial. For example, at a BRICS+ summit in November of 2022, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune spoke about the need for the bloc—his was the latest country to apply to become a member. President Tebboune argued that "the continued marginalization of developing countries, within the various institutions of global governance, constitutes a sure source of instability, inequality and development."⁴¹

Nonetheless, even as "intensified geopolitical and economic disputes exacerbated by Russia's war in Ukraine and ensuing Western sanctions have put BRICS in the spotlight," critics are unconvinced of its promising geopolitical positioning, and believe that members have no common ideology or cause that would successfully create a strong enough bloc. (O'Connor, 2022) Widening economic disparities between member states exacerbated by the pandemic is another common critique. And with none of the BRICS economies predicted to expand in the coming years barring China, the bloc's negotiating power remains in question. (Brennan, 2020)

Diplomatic Ties in the Global South

Russia is depicted, both in Western and Eastern media alike, as a bulwark against the hegemonic structures that favor the Global North. (Dooley, 2020) This can be seen in Russia's growing hostility towards the North Atlantic Organization (NATO) and the country's perception that NATO is expanding too close to Russia's borders. In late 2021, Moscow demanded the bloc

⁴¹ Tom O'Connor, "Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa BRICS Bloc Grows with U.S. Left Out," *Newsweek*, Nov. 7, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/brazil-russia-india-china-south-africa-brics-bloc-grows-us-left-out-1757643>

assure them that Ukraine would never receive a membership invitation, and that NATO weapons and troops would never be deployed on Ukrainian soil. Some credit the failure of the West to meet these requests with the impetus to the War on Ukraine.⁴²

Keith Gottschalk, a political scientist at the University of the Western Cape, notes that a majority of the anti-Ukrainian commentary in South African media is more focused on US government foreign policy in the context of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars rather than the West's policies in the context of the war on Ukraine. (Roy, 2022) This detail suggests that South Africa takes more issue with Western imperialism and U.S. foreign policy in the broader sense than in the specific case of Ukraine.

Brazil and South Africa are two countries with historical and current bilateral ties with the former Soviet Union. They also both share tension with the West as a result of years of imperialism and the presupposition of global inferiority. This inherently gives them sufficient reason to avoid alienating Russia by directly condemning Putin's attacks on Ukraine.

But even so, Brazil and South Africa both demonstrate an understanding of global economic relationships which continue to center on Western dominance, as well as an understandable desire to appease as a way to progress. This presentation of neutrality is strategic and controversial, while also being a means of preservation in some regard, particularly as both countries continue to fight what President Lula identifies as "two wars"; the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and the Covid-19 pandemic. (Kumar & Labbate, 2022)

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt across the globe, but researchers across sectors and regions have acknowledged that developing nations were most severely affected,

⁴² Ted Galen Carpenter, "The U.S. and NATO Helped Trigger the Ukraine War. It's Not 'Siding With Putin' to Admit It," *The Cato Institute*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/us-nato-helped-trigger-ukraine-war-its-not-siding-putin-admit-it>.

both on a human level as well as national. In a story for the *Guardian*, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that economic vulnerability grew in relatively youthful countries following the pandemic. “Households typically reported a drop in income,” Appiah writes. “People lost jobs or had a harder time selling their goods. Half of the rural households in Kenya they surveyed had to skip meals or shrink them; in Sierra Leone, that number was nearly 90%.” He notes that, on a broader level, “Africa was on track to see economic growth of 3.2% in 2020,” now that’s estimated to have been 0.8%.”⁴³

Additionally, while explanations of BRICS hinge upon its member countries’ status as “emerging markets,”⁴⁴ this reductive language threatens to misrepresent a large portion of the global stage and their economic power. By referring to these countries as “developing,” it becomes tempting to think of them as lesser rather than understanding the colonial histories that inhibited their growth as sovereign nations. As the United States’ grip on the world loosens, and its self-proclaimed title as the “Indispensable Nation,”⁴⁵ shifts, there comes greater opportunity for a wider array of countries to gain footing on the geopolitical stage and within developing markets. (Sharafedin, Chow, & Tan, 2022)

Neutrality in the Global South: The West Reacts

Understanding the impact that the March 2 UN General Assembly (UNGA) special session vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine would have, the UN went to great measures to ensure a

⁴³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “A tale of two pandemics: the true cost of Covid in the global south,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 23, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/23/a-tale-of-two-pandemics-the-true-cost-of-covid-in-the-global-south](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/23/a-tale-of-two-pandemics-the-true-cost-of-covid-in-the-global-south).

⁴⁴ Jim O’Neil, “Is the Emerging World Still Emerging?” International Monetary Fund, Summer 2021, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2021/06/jim-oneill-revisits-brics-emerging-markets.htm>

⁴⁵ Madeleine K. Albright, “‘Is the U.S. Still the Indispensable Nation?’: A Conversation With Madeleine Albright,” The Wilson Center. May 28, 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-us-still-the-indispensable-nation-conversation-madeleine-albright>.

successful vote. If the UNGA was able to show complete solidarity with Ukraine, especially in the early days of the war, it was felt that they had a better chance of quashing Russian forces before too many lives were lost. (Philbrick, 2022)

However, the UNGA took several miscalculated steps in their efforts to sway member countries. Prior to the vote, the heads of 22 diplomatic missions released a joint letter to some member countries urging them to vote against Russia; a letter that was not well-received, especially by Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan. In response, Prime Minister Khan demanded "Are we your slaves?"⁴⁶

The vote functioned as a pivotal moment in the West's realization that the world as a whole was not standing as firmly behind them as they might have thought. While 141 of the 193 member states voted to condemn Putin's violation of international law, 35 abstained from the vote, and the remaining members voted with Russia.

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, the Chief Executive of the South African Institute of International Affairs notes, "Many in the West were baffled by the lack of overwhelming support from the Global South," naming South Africa specifically, and its "abstention at the United Nations General Assembly and call for both Ukraine and Russia to negotiate."⁴⁷ The West nevertheless continued its campaign for total support from the Global South.

As Vivek Mishra, fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi notes, speaking with *Al Jazeera*, the African Union has not bought into lobbying efforts by the West to

⁴⁶ FPJ Web Desk, "'Are we your slaves?': Pakistan PM Imran Khan miffed with EU for asking Pakistan to condemn Russia," *Free Press Journal*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/world/are-we-your-slaves-pakistan-pm-imran-khan-miffed-with-eu-for-asking-pakistan-to-condemn-russia>.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "How do Global South politics of non-alignment and solidarity explain South Africa's position on Ukraine?" The Brookings Institute, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-do-global-south-politics-of-non-alignment-and-solidarity-explain-south-africas-position-on-ukraine/>.

isolate Russia, citing, largely, economic and global food crisis concerns.⁴⁸ Even as representatives from the European Union embarked on a “global lobbying campaign” to boost support for Kyiv in non-western regions, “the sheer outrage felt within the [European] continent about this war and enmity towards Russia isn’t shared by the rest of the world.” (Mishra, 2022)

How will this affect South Africa and Brazil on the global stage?

Countries in the Global South including Brazil and South Africa continue to face obstacles towards increased authority and stable autonomy on the geopolitical stage, even as they continue to develop their political prowess and expand their economic networks.⁴⁹ By taking a neutral stance in regards to the Ukraine War and sanctions against Russia, Brazil and South Africa are leveraging their autonomy. Their resistance to Western efforts to sway their position is likely to generate tensions with the United States and the European Union. (Gottschalk, 2022) This may demonstrate a trend for future diplomatic relationships with all the major poles of power,⁵⁰ with the region looking to “turn frustration into a new strategic agenda,” as discussed in a *Folha* article on the resurgence of BRICS. (Alencastro, 2022)

In recent years, international policy experts have seen a shift towards a more multipolar geopolitical stage; a pivot that has largely contributed to the Global South’s ability to resist the influence of global superpowers and, at the same time, provide burgeoning “powers such as

⁴⁸ Priyanka Shankar, “Why are some nations neutral on the Russia-Ukraine war?” June 23, 2023, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/23/why-global-south-nations-stay-neutral>

⁴⁹ Sebastian Haug, “What or where is the ‘Global South’? A social science perspective,” The London School of Economics, Sept. 28, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/09/28/what-or-where-is-the-global-south-a-social-science-perspective/>.

⁵⁰ Fernando Brancoli, “War in Ukraine and Elections in Brazil,” The Wilson Center, March 25, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/war-ukraine-and-elections-brazil>.

Russia - and potentially China - to act on their dissatisfactions in a way they could not during the 1990s and 2000s.” (Gottschalk, 2022)

Brazil, for example, has developed deep economic ties with Russia and China that mean the country may find itself unable to so severely cut ties with them in the same way as the United States, whose centuries of economic stability, networked trade relations, and historic hesitancy towards relationships with Russia and China, have kept it from developing dependence on the two nations.

Today, it is increasingly likely that South Africa and Brazil will continue to prioritize their autonomy and relationships that help to facilitate an end to their global inferiority. (Haug, 2021) As previously mentioned in “Colonial Context,” analysts have spotlighted how both of these countries continue to engage in diplomatic independence - an example being South Africa’s aforementioned decision to hold naval exercises with Russia and China in a public reassertion that “it will not allow the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to dictate its diplomatic relations [...] and that the BRICS alliance is still a global player.” (Chutel & Eligon, 2023) Sidiropoulos added that this naval exercise can be interpreted as BRICS “presenting itself as a ‘countervailing force to the West.’”⁵⁵

BRICS has previously demonstrated its strong intra-bloc allegiance in 2014 following the Russian annexation of Crimea, when Brazil, India, China and South Africa publicly opposed Western attempts to pull Russia out of the G20. China and South Africa even blamed NATO for the conflict, and India mobilized additional support by helping Russia maintain its trade ties. By continuing to participate in diplomatic endeavors with BRICS, “a group that has become

essential for the Russian president to avoid diplomatic isolation,”⁵¹ Brazil and South Africa’s image in the West—in its strong mobilization against Russia—may be in peril.

In her article for the Brookings Institute, Sidiropoulos further argues that the Ukraine War has reinvigorated foreign policy autonomy; the Global South is no longer so willing to passively fall in line with the calls of the Global North. (Sidiropoulos, 2022) Whereas the international order of the Cold War might have seen developing democracies defer to the West in their political response, the geopolitical context of today, as highlighted by the invasion of Ukraine, shows that the Global South can now afford to weigh the domestic effects before determining whose side to take. (Sidiropoulos, 2022)

Discussion and Conclusions

The existing research on this topic, as well as the findings in the research conducted in “Mediated Wars, Mediated Refuge: Global Media Narratives of the Russia-Ukraine War,” suggests that South Africa and Brazil have chosen a neutral response to the War in Ukraine because it is in their own country’s best interest; regardless of whether or not it is in line with the Western agenda. It is notable that, in this context, by acting in their best interest and choosing a neutral position, South Africa directly contrasted with the West’s push to condemn Russian aggression. Historically, global crises have rarely seen this response from the Global South, leading us to wonder if the global order has fundamentally shifted.

⁵¹ Oliver Stuenkel, “The War in Ukraine and the Emergence of the Post-Western World: A View from Brazil,” Institut Montaigne, Sept. 29, 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/war-ukraine-and-emergence-post-western-world-view-brazil>.

In the context of the Ukraine war, the world arguably saw non-Western countries face greater threats to their own nations' well-being should they have followed the West in their censure of Russia, than they did by crossing the West. The U.S.- led condemnation of, and sanctions against, Russia fit into its geopolitical positioning, with negative impacts being minor for a global superpower like the United States. However, cutting ties with Russia stands to impact major sectors of the developing economies of the Global South. Brazil and South Africa's geopolitical goals, for example, are still set on resuming growth and reversing the economic downturn from Covid-19. (Haug, 2020) Even as Western governments and their media networks attempted to depict the neutral position as pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine, especially in the immediate aftermath of Putin's initial attack on the neighboring country, the Global South did not succumb to the pressure of the West. And their media outlets can be seen to reflect this representative defiance in their resolute countering of Western demands.

It is this indication that the Global South is willing to side against the Global North that urges us to consider how these formerly oppressed countries can firmly establish themselves as global players that function without having to rely on the resources and power of Western nations. This paper functions largely to examine representation of the Ukraine War in the Global South, and any mention of Western narratives are largely for supplemental context rather than to draw any comparative conclusions. Through this analysis, it becomes possible to see the growing interdependence of Global South nations posing a threat to the West in the potential future, especially as diplomatic ties within the Global South grow, forming stronger connections with other global superpowers like Russia and China. The current multilateral positioning of the world is continuously evolving and stands to be reassessed, but our current research strongly suggests

that the Global South is no longer a 'region' to be dictated by the West in every geopolitical aspect.

As the war continues and transnational relationships evolve, it is likely these issues will also continue to change, both in prominence and topicality. Other geopolitical issues have begun to take center stage as the War in Ukraine becomes a part of the world's daily news routine, causing a shift in the narrative of the media regarding the war. This research paper examines only the period of time from Feb. 24, 2022-March 14, 2022 and thus is not representative of the media's narrative surrounding the War in Ukraine overall. Recent months have seen an increase in both media and policy reports criticizing the Western push for unity on the Ukraine War and calls for greater sanctions against Russia.⁵² It is possible this can be interpreted as a growing understanding of the detrimental effects this response would have on non-Western countries. Here, we begin to see indications that the Global South and its news media appear more comfortable taking a position that conflicts with the West. This criticism of the Global North can also be seen in the adoption of a neutral diplomatic stance for strategic benefit by Brazil, South Africa, and other countries within the Global South; especially as it is manifested in media reporting focused on the effects of the Ukraine War.

⁵² Leonie Kijewski and Jacopo, L. Barigazzi, "Hawkish countries call for more EU sanctions against Russia," *POLITICO*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-lithuania-european-sanction-ukraine-russia-war/>.