European War and Global Pandemic: The Renewed Validity of Active Non-Alignment

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"Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's."

S. Jaishankar, Indian foreign minister, at GLOBESEC 2022 Forum,

The Economic Times, June 6, 2022

The war in Ukraine is a turning point in the international relations of the Twenty-first century. As the bloodiest confrontation in Europe since World War II and with no end in sight, it has brought back the horrors of war to a continent that many thought had left them behind.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, in violation of international law and of basic principles such as 'respect for national sovereignty' enshrined in the UN Charter, and due to the humanitarian suffering that it has brought, has been widely condemned by vast sectors of the international community. It has generated a strong consensus within NATO and the G7 countries, putting an end to the divisions in the transatlantic Alliance during the administration of Donald Trump. This has led to large flows of direct and indirect military and economic aid to Ukraine, which has enabled Kiev to resist the Russian offensive during the first year of the conflict.

President Joseph Biden has argued that the war in Ukraine expresses what would be the main cleavage in the international system, the one between democracies and autocracies, something that has been echoed in several European countries (Youngs, 2022). Given the long tradition of commitment to international law and the principles of 'national sovereignty' as well as 'non-intervention' existing in Latin America, a region with an overwhelming majority of democratic regimes, one would have expected a reaction similar to Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia. However, this has not been the case.

Although no Latin American countries voted against the resolution (four of them, Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua abstained, and Venezuela was not present) condemning the Russian invasion in the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022, nine of them abstained and three voted against a subsequent resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. No country in Latin America has supported the diplomatic and economic sanctions on Russia promoted by the United States and the European Union. The presidents of the two largest South American countries – Argentina and Brazil – paid state visits to Moscow shortly before the Ukraine invasion, with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro saying he was doing so “in solidarity with Russia”. The president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has also expressed his neutrality in the conflict.

What explains this apparently counterintuitive behavior of some of the main Latin American countries in the face of a conflict of this type, a true watershed in international affairs? How does the preference for non-alignment expressed by the Latin American countries compare to nations in other regions of the South? What new trends and key patterns do we observe in terms of the foreign policy and diplomatic positioning of these countries in the Global South, and what are the implications for international governance?

A response to the competition for hegemony

The concept of “Active Non-Alignment” (ANA) emerged in 2019 (Ominami, 2019) as a conceptual tool and foreign policy recommendation for countries to deal with the challenges posed by the US-China competition for hegemony, specifically the pressure to pick sides, and was subsequently further developed (Fortin, Heine and Ominami, 2020; 2021). The most visible expression of these risks was the aggressive campaign of the Trump administration to persuade, or rather force, Latin American governments to cut or at least reduce their commercial, financial, technological and investment ties with the PRC. The term “active” alludes to a foreign policy in constant search of opportunities in a changing world, evaluating each of them on their own terms. It recognizes the historical roots of the policy of Non-Alignment but adapts the concept to the realities of the new century. It requires an especially deft foreign policy, one attuned to the emerging challenges in the international environment.

ANA calls on Latin American governments to not accept a priori and in toto the positions of any of the Great Powers in conflict, but to define their international behavior according to their own sovereign interests, without giving in to diplomatic, political, or economic pressure from hegemonic powers. There is an interesting parallel with contemporary European debates and the proposals for European strategic autonomy, a concept promoted by French president Emmanuel Macron, and which finds support in the high representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell (Besch and Scazzieri, 2020).

Taking a page from the earlier tradition of the twentieth century Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), whose origin was the Bandung Conference of 1955 under the leadership of figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sukarno and others, but adapting it to the realities of the 21st century, ANA underlines the urgency to respond to the difficult moment of an increasingly marginalized and fragmented world. In 2020, as its GDP fell by 6.6%, Latin America’s economy went through what the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has called its “greatest contraction in 120 years” (ECLAC, 2021) However, from the beginning of ANA as a concept has referred to a broader spatial and temporal scope: its appeal can be conceived as extending across the Global South as a whole, and can be applied to situations of hegemonic conflict in general.

In addition to rescuing the honorable tradition of the NAM, the new ANA is also inspired by the Autonomy School of Latin American International Relations, represented by authors such as Helio Jaguaribe and Juan Carlos Puig. But above all, ANA is based on the recognition of what the World Bank has called the “Wealth Shift” from the North Atlantic to Asia-Pacific that has taken place since the beginning of the Twenty-first century, (de la Torre et al, 2015). According to related projections, in 2050 the three largest economies in the world will be China, India, and the US, in that order. By that year, of the world's top 10 economies, seven will be non-Western. The diplomacy of the “cahiers des doléances” of what used to be known as the Third World has been replaced by what is now called “collective financial statecraft” of the New South, embodied in the new multilateral development banks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (BAII) and the New Development Bank (NDB, the so-called “BRICS Bank”) that open up new perspectives for countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

This means that “the leading nations of the developing world not only do not want to have to choose sides in the new cold war but also—much more important—do not feel they have to” (Traub, 2022). As a New South emerges and replaces the old Third World, there is a generalized sense that the Western-dominated international order “does not address their security needs, their existential concerns in food and finance, or transnational threats such as climate change” (Menon, 2022).

That said, Active Non-Alignment does not mean neutrality. The latter, by definition, implies not taking positions on international issues. Switzerland, with its reluctance to join the EU and, until 2002, even the United Nations, embodies this policy of neutrality. ANA as a foreign policy option is not about refusing to take a stand on international issues, but about refusing to align automatically with one or another of the Great Powers. In this approach, governments put their national interests at the forefront, rather than those of foreign powers.

We use the qualifier "active" to express that this non-alignment is perfectly compatible with taking a position (critical or supportive) of the decisions adopted by any of the Great Powers. Each of these decisions will be evaluated on its merits without a priori prejudice of any kind. Neutrality entails refraining from issuing an opinion. On the contrary, ANA contemplates taking a position based on convictions. Thus, for example, given the dilemma that Chile and Mexico were presented with as non-permanent members of the UN Security Council in 2003, in the face of pressure from the United States to support it in a resolution endorsing the invasion of Iraq, the doctrine of neutrality would have led to not making a statement one way or the other. Instead, opposing such a resolution was consistent with an ANA position. In turn, nothing prevents a country that embraces this doctrine from condemning, for example, some practices of the Chinese government that violate human rights.

In the heyday of the NAM, non-alignment meant, at a minimum, not joining the military alliances of either of the two superpowers, namely the United States or the USSR. In the new century, in a globalized and interdependent world, a more flexible approach is needed. In turn, when we originally put forward the ANA proposal, some objected that it was a nostalgic reminiscence of the past and dismissed the possibility of a Second Cold War. Yet events such as the "quasi-crisis" in Taiwan caused by the visit of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in August 2022, recalling episodes from the 1950s, seem to confirm our diagnosis.

The references to the notion of a new Cold War and the resurgence of Non-Alignment in the mainstream media as well as in the academic literature confirm that Non-Alignment has once again come to the fore in Latin America and the Global South as a whole (Rachman, 2022; Menon, 2022; Traub, 2022; Friedman and Sela, 2022). To those who criticize ANA, saying that it revives the concept of non-Alignment from the past and applies it to completely different contemporary circumstances, marked by phenomena such as the fourth industrial revolution, and related disruptive technological changes such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and cloud computing, we suggest that the validity and legitimacy of the concept is rooted in history. ANA vindicates the historical non-Alignment efforts that created a space for the post-colonial world.

That said, we are critical of the aligned form that non-Alignment ultimately assumed in Latin America, as Cuba ended up much too close to the Soviet Union, which was determined in large part by the measures adopted to ensure the survival of the regime after the revolution.

The new context: covid-19 and warfare bring the state back in

Badly wounded by the Lehman Brothers crisis of 2008, 'globalization' as we have known it in recent decades is being unwound. This has even been proclaimed by Larry Fink the chairman of BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager and pension fund manager (Financial Times, 2022). A radical questioning of the key idea of globalization has taken hold; that is, the transformation of the world into a single, large, unified market, dominated by companies that impose their consumption and production standards and locate themselves in different countries according to their comparative advantages, in terms of labor costs, raw material availability or proximity to large markets.

In the financial sphere, the 2008-09 crisis was managed by the United States, China, G7 central banks and the ECB through monetary expansion. This generated a boom in financial and stock markets. But there has also been a general monetary expansion around the world – including in the EU – to try to compensate for the negative effects of the economic slowdown on the most vulnerable sectors of the population.

The war in the Ukraine aggravates world economic problems that date back to the financial crisis of 2008-09. They have been exacerbated by the economic tensions between the United States and Europe, on the one hand, and China, on the other hand, as well as by the Covid-19 pandemic.

One effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the disruption of value chains in global manufacturing. This has been especially apparent in the microprocessor sector, with its impact on many other areas. This phenomenon has shown the vulnerability of the integration of national production into globalized chains that can be disrupted by external shocks, as well as the risks of external dependence on essential goods. The latter was clearly seen in Europe during the pandemic, in terms of the availability of medical supplies. This brought into question the relationship with China as the world's leading producer of essential health products. According to data from the Peterson Institute for International Economics, even before the pandemic China was exporting more respirators, surgical masks, medical goggles and protective equipment than the rest of the world combined (Brown, 2020). Its market dominance has not abated to this day. In turn, the pandemic and the war have generated a new attitude towards global trade integration and globalized value chains, and renewed efforts to increase national resilience and national self-sufficiency.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the policy response of the need to shorten production chains and revived notions such as national health sovereignty. In turn, the war in Ukraine has reinforced tendencies towards regionalization with strategies of relocation (reshoring), close relocation (nearshoring), the combination of domestic with foreign locations (multi-shoring), and locations in countries considered "friends" (friend-shoring).

Between February 2020 and February 2022, the world underwent a double shock: first the COVID pandemic, and then the war in Ukraine. The latter is the first international war since the mid-Twentieth century that is arguably 'global' in scope ("the first global war", according to Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, 2022), and the first to cause a sharp slowdown in economic growth throughout the world. Its impact on commodities such as oil, gas, aluminum, and cereals, and on agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, is almost global.

The global financial effect of both crises has been a strong increase in demand, which, in a context of reduced supply and interruption in supply chains, has translated into a general rise in prices. Stagflation (economic stagnation together with inflation) has reappeared, making it difficult to manage this crisis, due to the limits of monetary policy in the current scenario.

In this context, economics as the driving force in the booming decades of globalization has been displaced by geopolitics. In the previous paradigm, large multinational companies were the most influential players; their activity was deployed worldwide and driven, above all, by cost-benefit calculations. Today, nation-states have regained their centrality, putting their own political and strategic calculus front and center. The economy is subordinated to politics.

The result is an abandonment in the US and Europe of policies and ideologies that minimize the role of the State. Rather it has been the 'return of the state'. During the pandemic and with rising inflation linked to the energy crisis, the Biden administration has launched massive public spending programs to rescue the sectors most affected by the crisis and to give a new impetus to economic activity (CNN, 2022). The EU also launched the NextGeneration EU recovery plan during the pandemic, which includes spending 750 billion euros (Euronews.next, 2022). These measures have prevented the economic collapse of the most vulnerable in these leading economies and made it possible to maintain economic activity. But they have also contributed to the increase in inflation, globally.

ANA gains new currency amid this new world context as an option for countries seeking to maintain their autonomy and their sovereignty, and not be under the thumb of any of the Great Powers.

Latin America and the geopolitization of international relations

The geopolitization of international relations prioritizes power, national defense, and security issues over economic efficiency. It also leads to evaluating economic policy options in terms of their possible impact on the geopolitical balance of power.

The US government increasingly defines its relationship with China in the fields of trade and technology in terms of geopolitical criteria. This trend began explicitly during the Trump administration, but has continued, albeit with less strident rhetoric, under the Biden administration. In 2019 the Trump administration accused, without any evidence made public, the Chinese company Huawei, one of the world's largest providers of telecommunications equipment, of including "backdoors" in its equipment that would allow it to carry out espionage for the Chinese government. In May 2019, Washington included Huawei on the list of companies with which US companies are prohibited from doing business. The Biden administration has, to date, upheld the ban.

Along similar lines, with the war in Ukraine, the governments of Western Europe, and especially the German government, have reassessed the consequences of their dependence on Russian gas. An immediate result has been the shift to (more expensive) LNG, shipped from the United States and from the Gulf. Others, like France, are reassessing the nuclear option adopted in 1975. The steadfast rise in energy prices across Europe became a major political issue, with governments scrambling to come up with solutions to the emergency. Germany's massive subsidy package to consumers triggered protests in neighboring countries making the case for a European-wide response.

The impact of the COVID pandemic and the Russia/Ukraine war on the Latin American economies has had subregional and national variations, but for the region as a whole it has led to a significant slowdown. In 2020, the region had negative GDP growth of -6.6%, the highest of any region (ECLAC, 2021). In 2021, an expansion of 6.3% was the result of the fiscal stimulus packages introduced by the governments. For 2022, ECLAC initially estimated a growth of 2.3%, but after the start of the war it lowered its growth forecasts to 1.8%. Chile, perhaps the most developed country in the region, is projected to have a -1.3 GDP growth in 2023.

Another negative consequence for Latin America is uncertainty about investment which threatens, according to ECLAC, a possible return to the very low growth levels of 2014-2019 (ECLAC, 2022). The same goes for the persistence of inflation and the concomitant high interest rates in developed countries, which generate capital outflows, exchange rate devaluations and further increases in domestic prices. These factors are likely to have a negative effect on poverty and inequality across the region. ECLAC forecasts that regional poverty in 2022 will reach 33% (0.9 points higher than the projected value for 2021) and that extreme poverty will reach 14.5% (0.7 points more than in 2021) given that the increase in food prices is greater than that of other goods.

In the case of Brazil, a leading agricultural producer that imports one fourth of its fertilizers from Russia, joining the sanctions against Moscow would have meant sacrificing an important part of its agricultural production (The New York Times, 2022a). It has not done so. Beyond Brazil's reaction to the war in Ukraine, there were precedents for a more independent behaviour on the part of Brasilia. Although Bolsonaro led what was perhaps the most pro-US Brazilian government in history, it refused to exclude Huawei from the bid for 5G networks, despite pressure from Washington. (Stuenkel, 2021). In other words, in the past few years, most Latin American countries have already been applying a policy of non-alignment, realizing that they have very little to gain by automatically aligning with Washington or with Beijing. In this sense, rather than a being a future-oriented proposal, ANA already constitutes an observable empirical trend, even pattern, of extant Latin American foreign policy, “the region’s most important foreign policy development since the end of the Cold War”, in the words of Brian Winter (2022).

Latin America faces an enormous challenge and, at the same time, a remarkable opportunity. The challenge lies in reintegrating after decades of regional disintegration. The opportunity is leveraging such regional unity in relation to the Great Powers, in particular with China and the United States. However, this requires a fundamental political condition: Latin American convergence. Active Non-Alignment provides a useful guide to action in this regard.

Non-alignment across the global south

In recent years, Latin American countries have had to confront and manage the tensions between the US and China. On issues such as infrastructure projects, digital connectivity, and the deployment of 5G technology, Washington has pressured Latin American countries not to reach agreements with Beijing. Nonetheless even in the midst of the pandemic and a deep economic recession, several governments in the region, right, left and center, chose to focus on their own national interests and not to automatically side with Washington or Beijing. In addition to Brazil, what happened with Huawei has been repeated in several countries in the region. Some, such as Ecuador and Uruguay, have stressed that it is key for the countries of the area to have open options. Both countries, governed by conservative coalitions, are either negotiating free trade agreements with China, or exploring ways of doing so, after having been rebuffed by Washington in their attempts to sign FTAs with the United States. In this scenario, a position of alignment with the United States would make any such negotiations with China impossible.

This Latin American position was also made clear at the end of 2021, at the China-CELAC Ministerial Forum (Mexico City, December 2-3) and at the Summit for Democracies (Washington, December 9-10). The overwhelming majority of Latin American countries participated in both meetings and saw no contradiction in doing so.

Reactions across the Global South to the war in Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions against Russia demonstrate that ANA is not limited to Latin America. ANA has wider global attraction and applicability. The pattern is also observable in Africa and Asia, where the NAM originated, and, as James Traub (2022) has put it, “the Western demand to close ranks behind Ukraine did not provoke a backlash so much as crystallize ways of thinking that preceded the war”.

The current conflict between the US and Russia stemming from the war in Ukraine has generated some common responses from across the Global South and reproducing the dynamic of the “West versus the Rest”. India plays a central role in the Global South's reluctance to align itself in the Russia/Ukraine conflict, despite the rapprochement in recent years between India and the United States. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Trump exchanged visits in September 2019 and February 2020, respectively. Modi also visited the White House, invited by President Biden to participate in the first summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2021. The QUAD is a military alliance made up of the US, Japan, Australia and India; India is thus the country that occupies center stage in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Despite this, India has refused to condemn the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, and has actually stepped up its oil purchases from Russia, despite the imposition of US sanctions on trade with Moscow. It can be said that in this situation New Delhi has discovered its non-Aligned roots; in Europe's greatest crisis since World War II, India is acting accordingly. As Indian political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta puts it , “Paradoxically, the war in Ukraine has diminished trust in Western powers and concentrated people’s minds on how to hedge bets” (The New York Times, 2022b).

Furthermore, 17 African countries, including South Africa, abstained in the UN General Assembly vote on the resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine; 8 countries did not vote, and one voted against it. On the UN resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, 9 African countries voted against, 23 abstained, and 9 did not vote. Many others who voted in favor, have nevertheless opposed imposing sanctions on Moscow, knowing that more people will starve across the Global South as a result. According to the UN’s estimate, 13.1 million people could go hungry due to the war.

A key role in this process is played by an informal group, an entity largely ignored by Western media despite its obvious importance: the BRICS. This group, which brings together Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and which has held annual summits since 2009, has its own bank, the NDB, founded in 2015, and based in Shanghai. Its capital is US$ 50 billion dollars, the Bank has already lent US$ 15 billion, and it has been rated favorably by credit rating agencies.

The BRICS have positioned themselves as critical interlocutors and a key voice in the Global South, creating links and networks between these important non-Western countries, regardless of ideologies. With the possibility of expansion with other G20 members like Argentina and Indonesia, the BRICS embody the New South that has emerged in the new century.

A roadmap for avoiding tragedy

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine mark a turning point in world affairs. It constitutes an epochal change (eine Zeitenwende, in the expression of German chancellor Olaf Scholz, 2023) and has led to discussion of a “new Cold War” – this time of a tripolar nature. But far from weakening the ANA doctrine, these developments strengthen it. Faced with the reappearance of a confrontation between the Great Powers, an emerging Global South is picking up the traditions of the post-Second World War, post-colonial movement and is adapting them to the challenges of the new century.

For Latin America, ANA provides a useful roadmap for avoiding tragedy in a turbulent world and opens the possibility of defining a common position in the region. In the first Cold War, Latin American countries largely sided with the United States. Why is it different this time? The reason is simple. Whereas the Soviet Union did not have much to offer in terms of trade and investment opportunities, let alone financial cooperation, that is not the case with China, by now South America’s largest trading partner. At the same time, the United States, for reasons related to its domestic politics, is highly constrained in terms of the sort of financial resources it can deploy in the region, and more broadly. The same goes for granting access to the US market, limited by the increasingly anti-free trade sentiment in US public opinion. And whereas in the past there were veto players in Latin American countries (business groups and the military) that were in a position to block closer ties with the Soviet Union, it is not necessarily in their interests to do so with China today.

Strictly from the perspective of a rational actor, therefore, by far the best foreign policy strategy for Latin American governments of any political hue, is to keep their options open, and deal with Washington and with Beijing on an issue-by-issue bases, without committing a priori to either side.

As Catherine Osborn (2022) writes, Latin America's new Non-Alignment may well take on a green hue (as opposed to the red of its previous incarnation, as some accused), reflecting the urgent environmental priorities of a region especially vulnerable to climate change. Among the new (and not so new) crop of emerging Latin American leaders, such as Gustavo Petro in Colombia, Gabriel Boric in Chile and, critically, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, the issue of global warming and how to lower carbon emissions is front and center, a matter in which differences between North and South as to who and how to pay for such programs remain unresolved. Environmental issues may also be an anchor for building new coalitions across the Global South, and Brazil, with a strong record in entities such as IBSA and the BRICS, may be called upon to play a leading role.

We further suggest that ANA also has broader attraction and applicability across the Global South. Such a stance would allow the countries and the regions of the Global South to position themselves advantageouly in their relations with the rest of the world, something that has been underlined by the geopoliticization of international economic relations. If there is one thing the Latin America does not need at this time of acute economic crisis, it is to start making trade and investment decisions for ideological reasons. On the one hand this implies resisting pressure from the United States to reproduce the historical alignment based on the latter's hegemony and interests, and insisting on a more symmetrical and creative relationship. On the other hand, with respect to China, it requires maintaining the condition as being key trading partners but also defining a different relationship from the traditional center-periphery mode that China tends to prefer when it does not find resistance. For both tasks, the unity of purpose and action of the countries of the region is essential.

The good news is that a new Latin America is once again emerging from the recent wave of elections. For the first time in a long time there are states that declare their strong willingness to again take up regional integration: Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, as was reflected in the VII CELAC Summit held in January 2023 in Buenos Aires, and that led to the "Buenos Aires Declaration". The ANA proposal can find support and critical mass in these countries -- as a point of convergence in foreign policy.

New impetus must be put onto the implementation of an agenda of priority issues. Institutional definitions must focus on functional and pragmatic purposes, breaking with the long tradition in Latin America of creating institutions that end up condemned to a purely bureaucratic existence, or which disappear in the absence of clearly defined, specific, strategic tasks. The new progressive governments are called upon to reinvigorate the regional integration process that has languished in recent years by generating enduring mechanisms and institutions that go beyond the ideological affinities and the policies of the governments of the moment.

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This essay is part of **The Emerging Global Governance (EGG) Project**; a collaborative research initiative led by Gregory Chin at York University (Canada) and Eva-Maria Nag at Global Policy journal, Durham University.

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