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## The Perils of an Atlantic Outlook

**Australia's embrace of a western – and European – outlook on the war in Ukraine risks being out of touch with sentiment in our own region, writes John McCarthy.**

**By John McCarthy**

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A country's foreign policy is shaped both by history and geography.

For Australia, this means that while we are ideologically western, our central foreign policy focus should never deviate far from the Asia-Pacific. And an outlook shaped by western principles is not the same as one with an Atlanticist basis.

Being on the team to combat Russian aggression in Europe is ethically right and electorally attractive, but western policy on Ukraine has strategic pitfalls in our region. We need to be sure our own policy balance is right.

Russia's invasion of the Ukraine – and the misery which ensued – has rightly appalled the west and has had a major impact elsewhere.

But we have not fully grasped the reality that western perspectives on Russia are not shared — or are only partially shared – by much of the world including in our own region.

The United Nations General Assembly resolution on Ukraine of 2 March deplored the Russian invasion by 141 out of 193 votes. Five countries opposed the resolution, 38 abstained, and the remainder did not vote. Despite some notable abstentions, this was an obvious win for Ukraine and the west.

However, a further vote on 8 April to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council got through by 93 votes to 24, with 58 abstentions. While the resolutions were on different issues, the result on the second was clearly a less persuasive indication of global condemnation of Russia than the first.

Those abstaining on the first vote included significant developing countries important to Australia such as India and Vietnam. On the second vote, many big developing countries such as Brazil and Mexico – and in our own region Indonesia and Thailand – moved from yes to an abstention. Vietnam voted against.

The scorecard on sanctions on Russia throws the differences between the west and most of the developing world into even greater relief. Nearly all major non-OECD countries (and indeed some in the OECD) have declined to impose sanctions.

These countries include Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Turkey (a NATO member), Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, all of Africa, and in our own region all except the highly developed nations of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand.

It is not surprising that most developing countries are not on all fours with the west. Ukraine is seen as a European problem. The liberal international order is supported but is seen primarily as a western concept. Rightly or wrongly, sanctions are perceived to hurt developing countries more than developed ones. Many nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia have had satisfactory, even good, relations with Russia.

While the message that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a brutal imperialist venture has salience, there is a counter argument that the west, particularly the United States, cannot make this claim with clean hands.

The ambivalence of much of the developing world on Ukraine has led to some [informed speculation](#) that we may be witnessing a recrudescence of the North South economic divide, which was so much a feature of international discourse in the second half of the 20th century.

Against this background, our strong and vocal focus on the Ukraine issue could cause difficulties for wider Australian and indeed western interests in several ways.

First, it raises questions for our strategic posture in the region.

For some years, but particularly since the Putin-Xi summit, many in the west have tended to portray Russia and China as partners in crime with little daylight between their external policies.

There are grounds for this view. Despite China's professed uneasiness about the invasion and the loss of life deriving from it, the gravamen of its Ukraine policy has been to protect Russian interests. China is attaching greater weight to its partnership with Russia as an asset in achieving a favourable balance against the west than to the risk of reputational losses.

However, for many in the non-Atlantic world, including countries close to Australia, views about Russia and China are not straightforward.

In India, dismay has been expressed – including in the parliament – at Russian behaviour in Ukraine. Similarly, studies of social media in Vietnam have shown dissatisfaction about the human cost of the invasion.

Still, both governments declined to support resolutions condemning Russia. Both have long had largely positive relations with Russia. Both rely on Russia for weaponry, and perhaps most important, both see the relationship with it as of strategic benefit to them, including – and from a western perspective, ironically – as a balance against China.

In a recent [article for Foreign Affairs](#), the former Indian Foreign Secretary and National Security Adviser, Shivshanker Menon, put India's case eloquently. Having rehearsed India's interests with Russia, he noted that the Ukraine issue mattered greatly for Europe and had flow-on effects for Asia. However, the future of the global order did not lie in Europe, but in the competition with China in Asia. Similar views have been put publicly and privately by Vietnamese government figures and scholars.

A risk here is that our strategic alignments in the region – particularly with India and Vietnam – could be adversely impacted. It is hard to see the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), composed of the United States, Japan, India and Australia, as having much momentum while divisions with India exist. And as Vietnam is probably the member of ASEAN with whom Quad members have the greatest strategic contiguity in relation to China, it is in our interest that western differences with Vietnam be kept to a minimum.

A second issue relates to the impact that differences between regional and global groupings on Russia have on their effectiveness.

Three events in Asia in November this year – all of which would normally involve Russia – will prove difficult: the G20 Summit in Indonesia; the APEC meetings hosted by Thailand; and the East Asian Summit (EAS) hosted by Cambodia. Australia can genuinely take much credit for the creation of the G20 and APEC and worked assiduously for membership of the EAS. All three groupings are central to our global and regional diplomacy.

In the wake of COVID, we are all trying to put our economic house in order. For the developing non-Atlantic world, this is an even more burning objective. If its members are thwarted in attaining it, it is a safe bet that the west will get much of the blame.

All three host countries – but perhaps particularly Indonesia – matter to Australia. Our relationships with them and their dealings with the west as a whole have direct bearing on the question of how the rise of China will impact on the global order. All three attach importance to these meetings for domestic reasons. All three hosts would have major difficulties in excluding Russia and they have to factor in some very different approaches on Ukraine amongst other ASEAN members.

If Russia and Ukraine were to dominate proceedings, there is a risk that these groupings could be rendered ineffective for an indeterminate period.

Both the United States and China have been clear on the issue of Russian attendance at the G20. The United States and the West don't want Russia there and believe Ukraine should be discussed. China argues otherwise on both counts.

The diplomatic task here for Australia and other counters with similar views on Ukraine is to ensure that opposition to Russia is strongly registered without the meetings turning into circuses and with something positive in both global and regional terms coming out the other side. A cacophony of western outrage will achieve little.

The third point is this. While we can argue about how best to help Ukraine, help it we must. Moreover, we are right to put more emphasis than in recent years on our dealings with Europe. It is becoming increasingly clear that developments in the European and Asian theatres bear on each other.

But despite our being to the forefront in opposition to Chinese contentiousness, others might be forgiven for believing that in recent years we have conducted ourselves increasingly as a quasi-Atlanticist, rather than as an Asia-Pacific, power.

We were involved in what were mainly American or NATO ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We have embarked on the AUKUS exercise with the British and Americans without a full explanation as to why its objectives – for example on submarines and hypersonic weapons – could not have been fulfilled under existing structures involving the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

And we have made of the Five Eyes intelligence grouping – composed of the United States, the United Kingdom and the three former (mostly white) British dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand – a policy platform to pronounce on matters central to a region very conscious of its colonial experience.

It may be time for little less history and a tad more geography.