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Research Report

Engaging with partners in the Global South in uncertain times

IDOS Policy Brief, No. 5/2022

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Klingebiel, Stephan (2022) : Engaging with partners in the Global South in uncertain times, IDOS Policy Brief, No. 5/2022, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn,
<https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb5.2022>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/265451>

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Engaging with Partners in the Global South in Uncertain Times

Stephan Klingebiel

Summary

Having already been growing in importance for a number of years, geopolitics as it relates to the Global South has become tremendously more relevant following Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2022. Rivalries with China are set to become even more influential in future, determining inter-governmental relations as a whole.

Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, attention was initially concentrated on the stances adopted by states regarding the corresponding UN resolutions and UN debates. This focus alone illustrates the great significance attached to the positions taken by states and thus to strategic partisan thinking.

At the same time, it would seem that none of the country alliances being formed to date differ fundamentally from those of recent years. Many developing countries are capitalising on their emancipated status gained in recent decades to formulate positions of their own, as well as to identify any double standards on the part of Western governments. It is important that German, European and other political players gain a better idea of the interests and perceptions of partners in the Global South.

In development terms, Russia's war of aggression represents a watershed moment. It is important to note the following in this context:

- At overall level, it will most likely be more difficult to achieve the 2030 Agenda, with its 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). The COVID-19 pandemic had already produced a huge socio-economic shock in the Global South, but this has now been dwarfed in many developing countries by the impact of the war. On top of this, the increasingly critical effects of climate change are proliferating all the time.
- While the most severe consequences of the Ukraine war are being felt by the country itself (need for comprehensive humanitarian assistance; future need for large-scale reconstruction work) and the surrounding region (refugee care, etc.), the surge in food and energy prices resulting from the conflict is having a major impact on developing countries.
- There are also other long-term challenges in regard to global sustainable development. Take innovative co-operation instruments for tackling climate change, for instance, the most prominent of which are just energy transition partnerships (JETP). The legitimacy of efforts to promote these ambitious cooperation initiatives could be undermined by European countries introducing short-term measures that involve a return to fossil fuel investment.
- The growing need to overcome cross-border challenges could intersect with cutbacks being made by donor countries to their long-term development programmes. For example, some nations (particularly the UK and, in some cases, Germany) may scale back funding or increasingly charge for providing in-donor refugee costs and thus move to report a number of their activities as Official Development Assistance (ODA) (as planned by the Netherlands and Norway, for instance).
- We can expect the Ukraine war to reinforce the general trend towards interest-based development policy and increase demand for approaches that deliver quick results. Nevertheless, it is not possible to derive a clear regional, thematic or country allocation pattern from this trend.
- The issue of governance in developing countries is receiving greater attention in light of the risks posed by autocratic systems. The increase in cooperation with China and Russia, two nations employing their own global discourse in an attempt to promote what they refer to as "real democracy", is especially indicative of the way China in particular is striving to influence global debate.

Introduction

How should we describe, understand and translate into political action the watershed moment marked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022? This war of aggression is significantly impacting global governance structures (flagrant breach of the rule-based order in international relations, weakening of collective approaches), inter-governmental relations (for instance, which countries have a closer or less close relationship?) and global platforms (undermining of the United Nations (UN)). The conflict is also dealing an enormous blow to global prosperity (increasing expenditure on energy and food in many countries, slump in growth, etc.). A number of policy areas (such as energy security) are suddenly garnering more attention, due in part to significant expansion of public budgets (particularly for military spending). Other policy areas and challenges (such as climate action, perhaps) are fading from the political spotlight or being reappraised (take, for instance, the inconsistency in trends regarding the exploitation of (new sources of) fossil fuels).

All of these dynamics have important ramifications in regard to the Global South, as they are heavily influenced by players from this constellation of countries (geostrategic alliances, access to energy sources, etc.). Development policy plays a role alongside other policy areas in these changes. Consequently, the question arises as to what overarching geostrategic trends currently look like in the Global South and what impact the new context will have on development policy.

Against the backdrop of a highly uncertain environment, insufficient evidence, diverse interpretations and inconsistencies, this policy brief seeks to identify a number of dimensions for discussion and evaluation. This analysis relates to perspectives in Europe and, more especially, Germany.

Dynamic geopolitics: the Global South as a sought-after strategic partner

The term "Global South" suggests a homogeneous group of countries, one that, in reality, is recognised

to have ceased existing several decades ago. The sheer number of countries and their markedly differing circumstances (in terms of population size, systems of government and economic power) show the potentially imprecise and even misleading nature of such a simplistic categorisation. Nevertheless, many of these countries share a common colonial past and similar positions in regard to the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Political commonalities arise from alliances such as the Group of 77 (the largest group consisting of developing countries within the UN. Originally comprising 77 states, it has now grown to 134) and the Non-Aligned Movement, which considers itself an independent political power on the global political stage. Given Russia's policy of aggression, this (self-)perception as a country group could be reinforced by the reviving of "the West" or "Western nations" as an identity.

It is not even possible to identify any clear characteristics or formal membership requirements that constitute "the West" as a group of countries. Instead, it is considered a non-organised group defined by similar values in terms of open systems of democratic governance and linked in some cases through defence (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)), economic and political (European Union (EU) and G7) alliances. In addition to the member states of the EU, NATO and G7, Australia and South Korea are also considered part of "the West".

The risks regarding the perception of such an informal alliance can be seen particularly clearly in the negative picture painted by Russia of "the West" as a group of countries that needs to be combated. Based on this negative connotation, this group identity could be interpreted as an attempt to cement the global economic and political hegemony of the West as a minority of states. Russian aggression could give rise to a political juxtaposition of the West on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other. This would bring with it the risk that a number of developing countries could be more concerned with general questions of future global politics and co-determination than the

Ukraine war itself. This juxtaposition can be seen as a geopolitical conflict in which the Global South has experienced double standards and a long period of unjust political and economic structures.

Assessments of Russia's war against Ukraine differ among the countries of Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but especially on the African continent. There is no sign of a clear, united African voice unequivocally denouncing Russian aggression, occupation and displacement. The UN General Assembly's resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine was backed by a clear majority of 141 of the 193 member states. Looking at the African member states, 28 voted in favour, 16 abstained and nine did not turn out to vote. Eritrea was one of the few countries to vote no.

This observation can be explained in part by historical relations: the former Soviet Union, for instance, gave its backing to African liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia. And then there is criticism of Western double standards (Sidiropoulos, 2022), such as military intervention, primarily by the United States, without a UN mandate. This evokes memories of the "coalition of the willing" in Africa and elsewhere, a group of countries that joined the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 based on manipulated evidence. Reference is also made to brazen human rights violations, to situations where the international community turned a blind eye or played some other inglorious role. The 1994 Rwandan genocide is a particularly tragic example. And then there are several additional topics of a similar nature that reflect or reinforce global inequality. Take, for instance, the availability of COVID-19 vaccines. It shows the divide between wealthy countries and the Global South, and expresses the lack of solidarity in the West's approach to the matter.

Chairperson of the African Union (AU), Senegalese President Macky Sall, travelled to Russia in June 2022 with African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat for talks with

President Vladimir Putin. This was followed in July 2022 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Africa trip. The expressly cordial nature of both visits illustrates not only the significance of the war to food security, but also the fact that African nations are increasingly sought after as political allies and also, in some cases, as partners with access to energy resources. This was also evident from the trip made by G7 Chair, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, to Senegal, Niger and South Africa in June 2022 and from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's tour of Africa in August 2022.

A number of the countries that abstained from the UN General Assembly vote on 2 March grounded their decision in their non-aligned status. This concept goes back to the Non-Aligned Movement (see box). Nonetheless, it is necessary to recall at this point the first two Bandung Principles: respect for the UN Charter, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations. In this regard, Kenya's Ambassador to the UN, Martin Kimani, stressed during his speech to the UN Security Council on 24 February 2022 that his country's colonial past was a key argument against new colonial dominance and oppression.

Development-policy concepts and operational approaches to action

While development policy is not the only policy area to focus on all relevant cross-border challenges of recent years, it has made a significant contribution to tackling these challenges in most cases. The migratory pressure that has been tangibly mounting in the EU since 2015 in particular (due, among other things, to the war in Syria and the conflict situation in Afghanistan), the COVID-19 pandemic, the comprehensive, long-term work of many donors in Afghanistan (which ended with the withdrawal of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the subsequent complete takeover of the country by the Taliban), and, last but not least, the causes and effects of climate change are all tasks whose success hinges to a significant extent on development policy.

Non-alignment: How current are the Bandung ideas?

Many world events up to the end of the Cold War were viewed primarily either from a Western perspective (under the leadership of the US) or from an Eastern perspective (under the leadership of the former Soviet Union). Both blocs attempted to expand their respective spheres of influence. Many developing countries were keen to evade this pressure during the Cold War period. The Non-Aligned Movement can thus be understood as a political emancipation project.

The first major Asian-African Summit, also known as the Bandung Conference, was held in Bandung in April 1955 with this objective. It was attended by 29 countries, accounting for 54 percent of the world's population at the time. The conference preparations were driven by host nation Indonesia, along with Burma as it then was, India, the former Ceylon and Pakistan.

Given the geopolitical confrontation between East and West at that time, drafting the concept and political strategy of not aligning with these two major blocs and instead developing a separate approach based on the commonalities between a large number of states was a considerable achievement. The policy of non-alignment has never been about a lack of principles. The experiences of the non-aligned countries as former colonies were formative in this context. Instead, the Bandung Declaration draws on the principles of the UN Charter:

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations
2. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations
3. Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations, large and small
4. Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country
5. Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations
6. (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers
(b) Abstention by any country from exerting pressures on other countries
7. Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country
8. Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations
9. Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation
10. Respect for justice and international obligation

While the Non-Aligned Movement never really developed a truly formative role in international relations, it still exists. Many conflicts, including those within this movement, were difficult and controversial in terms of positioning. Nonetheless, the Bandung Principles offered and continue to offer a key normative framework.

Source: Author.

In development terms, Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a watershed moment. It is necessary to respond with many different short-, medium- and long-term approaches to the direct and indirect consequences of the war. Humanitarian and

refugee assistance is being provided in Ukraine and other countries (such as Moldova; both nations are listed as developing countries by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC)) just as longer-term approaches are employed in all devel-

oping regions. Development policy is a key strategy for mitigating the negative effects of the war on food security for people in the Global South.

The potential for social upheaval in various countries, the instrumentalisation of rocketing food and fertiliser prices for political purposes, and other consequences of war, such as dramatic increases in the price of energy, show the significant and direct impact of cascade effects on the living conditions of people in developing countries. These dynamics combine with the existing situation of all developing regions having been severely weakened in social and economic terms by the COVID-19 pandemic. Development policy as a whole is thus a policy area that has had to respond to multiple crises in recent years and that will have to do so to an even greater extent as a result of the war.

Subsequent changes in the context and policy area could be influenced in the coming years by the following factors:

- At overall level, the environment for the long-term 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is likely to remain unfavourable for the foreseeable future. The latest UN reports on achievement of the SDGs show that the pandemic alone has halted, and in many areas even reversed, years and decades of development progress. In July 2022, the UNDP (2022) estimated that an additional 71 million people in total are now living in poverty since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This represents a much faster increase in poverty levels than that caused by the pandemic.
- High food and energy prices are placing a tremendous burden on private households and public budgets in developing countries. And the higher interest rates are having an incredibly detrimental effect on the debt levels of many nations such as Zambia. A number of these countries are facing serious problems as a result, with some at risk of insolvency.
- Development policy actors will need to find a more intensive strategic approach for dealing with multiple crises. This could give rise to an increasing number of trade-offs with long-term development agendas. Simultaneously, it is evident when looking at development-policy debates that strained international relations will necessitate a reappraisal of geopolitical aspects relevant to development policy. This is true, for instance, in the case of China's South-South Cooperation approach.
- We can expect the Ukraine war to further reinforce the general trend of development policy being increasingly geared to particular interests. OECD countries and the major South-South Cooperation providers could become more interested for geostrategic reasons in investing with even greater intentionality in selected relationships with partners in the Global South. This could be based on the primary desire to cultivate good relations with like-minded states. They could, for instance, back the creation of alliances at the UN. At the same time, development-policy relations could increasingly serve to improve energy security and access to other strategic natural resources.
- There are many reasons why immense amounts of funding, including development cooperation resources, might be committed to tackling the fallout from the Ukraine war. These include the immense consequences of the conflict, especially for Ukraine itself, the long-term need for comprehensive humanitarian assistance, the enormous rebuilding costs at a later date (estimated at USD 750 billion by the Ukrainian Government in July 2022), and the ramifications for the region in terms of refugee care, etc.
- And then there are other long-term challenges still to address in terms of global sustainable development. Take innovative cooperation instruments for tackling climate change, for instance, the most prominent of which are just energy transition partnerships (JETP). The legitimacy of efforts to promote these ambitious cooperation initiatives could be undermined by European countries introducing short-term

measures that involve a return to fossil fuel investment.

- The growing need to overcome cross-border challenges could intersect with donor countries making cutbacks to their long-term development programmes. For example, some nations (particularly the UK and, in some cases, Germany) may scale back funding or increasingly charge for providing in-donor refugee costs and thus move to report a number of their activities as ODA (as planned by the Netherlands and Norway, for instance). The need to finance additional military capability for different EU and NATO states and the economic ramifications of this for the EU and the G7 as primary donors could lead to development budgets being cut. Attending Think7, the forum of leading think tanks supporting the G7 process in June 2022, the Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) stressed that the focus in future must be on doing much more with less finance.
- Governance in developing countries and elsewhere has become an increasingly topical issue in recent months and years. Take, for instance, the populist movements in Europe or the direction taken by the US Republican Party. The risks emanating from autocratic systems should be afforded far more attention. This is becoming plain for all to see through Putin/Russia's war against Ukraine and, in some cases, the mutual support between autocratic systems and populist governments, such as Brazil. The autocratisation trend in sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, Venezuela and, in particular, China and Russia, ongoing for almost two decades now, has led to a change in the way these challenges are perceived politically.
- China is increasingly looking for allies to help it establish new international perspectives and rules of play. The increase in cooperation with China and Russia, two nations employing their own discourse in an attempt to promote what

they refer to as "real democracy", is indicative of the way China in particular is striving to influence global debate.

- As seen in Sri Lanka and other countries, the war in Ukraine can have an enormously destabilising impact, which intensifies further when combined with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. This is all the more so the case when resources are misappropriated in nations with corrupt governments, or when crisis management goes hand in hand with a non-existent or barely functional public sector.

Interests, perspectives and competition: the role of the Global South in uncertain times

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, much attention has been focused on where countries and groups of countries stand on the respective UN resolutions and debates. This focus on voting behaviour underscores in and of itself the fresh relevance attached to the political positioning of states. It can be observed here how strategic partisan thinking in regard to the Ukraine war is playing an increasingly significant role.

At the same time, it would seem that none of the country alliances being formed to date differ fundamentally from those of the last few years. In addition to this, many developing countries are using the political and economic emancipation they have gained in recent decades to formulate their own positions, as well as to identify any double standards on the part of Western governments.

It is important that German, European and other political players gain a better idea of the interests and perceptions of partners in the Global South. Expecting other countries to see Russia's war against Ukraine, and indeed other key geopolitical issues, in the same way as the West is hardly likely to be a politically successful course of action. Representatives of other nations are quite rightly pointing to the failures of Germany or the West as a whole (lack of energy diversification in Germany,

etc.) and outlining their own perspectives and interests (Tellis, 2022). As such, existing formats for open dialogue should be leveraged and expanded within and beyond the development-policy sector. Development policy has different types of development diplomacy at its disposal (German political foundations, international think-tank networks, etc.) that could be deployed more effectively.

There is a recognisable trend whereby international and global economic relationships, relations with the Global South and development policy will be dominated to a far greater extent in future by geostrategic topics and problems. The United States is expressly working on the assumption that rivalry with China will be expressed in permanent competition in all areas (economy, military, spheres of influence, etc.). While currently still overshadowed in people's minds by the Russian war, this contest with China is likely to become even more definitive in future.

Rivalries between key players in the Global South are also expected to become more prominent in future, not least that between India and China. India's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine is heavily influenced by the question of how the

conflict will impact upon the balance of power between China and India. At the same time, China is showing an interest in expanding the current BRICS group of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) to include developing countries outside of the G20. This is presumably another attempt by the People's Republic to expand its sphere of influence.

"Uncertainty" is likely to become an increasingly systemic challenge across the board. This needs to be reflected to a greater extent in development policy and other policy areas. The crises of the last few years that were unanticipated or insufficiently anticipated (pressure on Europe from migration, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Russia's policy of aggression, and the clearly visible climate-related disasters all around the world) put decision-makers under pressure. Crises demand immediate action, leaving little scope for anticipatory and influence-exerting approaches. The need for proactive strategies grows exponentially in a context of uncertainty. Against this backdrop, strategic foresight and action across policy areas have a key role to play. The development-policy sector has a lot of catching up to do in this regard.

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Published with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW).

Suggested citation:

Klingebiel, S. (2022). *Engaging with partners in the Global South in uncertain times* (IDOS Policy Brief 5/2022). Bonn: IDOS. <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb5.2022>.

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IDOS Policy Brief / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN (Print) 2751-4455

ISSN (Online) 2751-4463

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb5.2022>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn

E-mail: publications@idos-research.de

<http://www.idos-research.de>

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

