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South Africa's Non-alignment Conundrum amidst the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

1 Balancing an Act: Mapping the Landscape

South Africa's non-alignment stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has resulted in considerable debate about the feasibility and consequences of this approach, especially in highly polarized situations. Politically, non-alignment is characterized by avoiding allegiance to any grouping in a conflict, focusing instead on pragmatic and strategic interests. This strategy aligns closely with the principles of "realpolitik," a political philosophy centered on practicality and pursuing national interests above ideological or moral considerations. Pioneered by 19th-century Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck, realpolitik underscores the importance of leveraging diplomacy, military strength, and alliances to consolidate national security and achieve political stability (Lerman 2004, ix–xi). Bismarck's application of this philosophy in Europe is often cited as an excellent example of balancing competing powers to preserve peace on the continent while maintaining Germany's preeminent position during his time in office. His ability to negotiate treaties, such as the Three Emperors' Alliance, exemplifies how strategic maneuvering can stabilize volatile geopolitical landscapes (Medlicott 1945). Today, the evolution of realpolitik into a broader framework for strategic statecraft has made it an invaluable tool for countries traversing complex geopolitical challenges. This often requires striking a balance between national aspirations and international obligations. This has allowed countries like South Africa to navigate complex Global dynamics without overtly aligning themselves with any particular bloc, thereby maintaining strategic autonomy while demonstrating high diplomatic flexibility. This principle is reflected in South Africa's apparent commitment to a non-alignment approach.

The notion of non-alignment is not new. Historically, it embodies the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (hereafter NAM), established in 1961 as a platform for countries that chose not to align with the superpowers of the Cold War (Van der Westhuizen 2024, 613–614). At the time, the NAM's ethos, grounded in sovereignty, self-determination, and rejecting neocolonialism, strongly resonated with newly independent African nations and their liberation movements. The importance of non-alignment in specific contexts cannot be overstated. However,

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South Africa's non-alignment approach, particularly in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has revealed critical shortcomings in coherence, consistency, and practical implementation. This has fueled intense debate about the feasibility and broader implications of non-alignment within a deeply polarized geopolitical landscape.

Since the onset of the conflict in 2022, South Africa has consistently maintained a policy of abstention in United Nations votes condemning Russia, a decision it claims to be rooted in a desire to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Fabricius 2023). This position is consistent with South Africa's longstanding support for communication and amicable resolutions to Global conflicts. Nonetheless, this stance has drawn criticism for its seeming inconsistencies. For instance, while purporting neutrality, South Africa has actively engaged in joint military exercises with Russia and China, dispatched high-ranking defence officials to Moscow, and allowed the docking of Russian vessels under ambiguous circumstances (Bartlett 2024). Open to varying interpretations, these actions have fostered a perception of implicit support for Russia, undermining South Africa's claims of impartiality. In this regard, detractors contend that these developments hinder the country's capacity to act as an effective mediator, eroding its credibility as an unbiased and impartial actor in Global affairs. According to Akopari (2018, 247), this inconsistency, or unduly aligned stance with certain powers, puts South Africa's moral authority and diplomatic leverage at risk.

On another level, South Africa's non-alignment stance can be interpreted as an attempt to balance its historical ties with Russia, its membership in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) coalition, and its economic dependency on Western trade and investment. The ruling political party in South Africa, the African National Congress (hereafter ANC), and its historical alignment with the Soviet Union during the anti-apartheid struggle adds another layer of complexity. Concretized during the Cold War, these ties reflect a shared history of ideological solidarity against Western imperialism (Weiss and Rumer 2019, 4). Although these ties offer a tenable explanation for the ANC government's hesitation to denounce Russia, they also highlight its ambiguity and poorly defined foreign policy in coming to terms with conflicting perceptions of reality. For this reason, the ANC government has come under heavy criticism both domestically and internationally. Domestically, opposition parties and civil society organizations have demanded greater accountability and transparency of foreign policy. In this context, concerns have been raised about South Africa's commitment to respecting international norms and principles in light of its actions (Nadkarni et al. 2024, 452).

Despite the inconsistencies in the South African response, the principle of non-alignment, broadly considered, can be valid in certain situations. For in-

stance, it may apply in cases where conflicting parties bear equal culpability or when a country's neutrality allows it to mediate disputes between opposing sides. Historical examples, such as Switzerland's neutrality during the World Wars, underscore the utility of non-alignment in fostering peace and maintaining national sovereignty. In this way, Switzerland's neutrality has allowed it to play a pivotal role in hosting diplomatic negotiations and, in some cases, providing humanitarian aid where necessary (Fischer and Möckli 2016). Similarly, Harshe (1990, 399) claims that India's leadership in the NAM during the Cold War exemplified how non-alignment, supported by moral justification and well-defined goals, can improve a nation's international standing. What becomes apparent when using these examples is that South Africa's response to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict falls short of the clarity and moral foundation that undergirds neutrality. This results in an erosion of South Africa's reputation as a reliable arbiter of what may be considered just and humane. If anything, the effectiveness of non-alignment (and neutrality) as a strategy hinges on the capacity to engage constructively with those involved in the conflict. South Africa falls short in this regard, begging serious questions about the effectiveness of its current strategy.

2 Neutrality and Non-Alignment: A Double-Edged Sword in International Diplomacy

Given the South African predicament, the success of the non-alignment lies in its ability to balance pragmatic considerations with moral imperatives. Ideally, these imperatives should resonate not just with those within your immediate frame of reference, as in a narrow, selfish pursuit. However, it should also stir the moral imagination of those of the various factions involved in the dispute – keeping in mind that these decisions are rarely devoid of self-interest and are often framed within a broader principle narrative. Here, the example of France's opposition to the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 is quite helpful. Cogan (2004, 121–126) reminds us that despite France's status as a primary member of the Western alliance, it refused to endorse the military intervention in Iraq. Calling for further inspections, at the time, the French government remained unconvinced that Iraq indeed had weapons of mass destruction (or WMD), promoting significant backlash from its US counterpart. The French foreign minister outlined this position at the United Nations (hereafter UN), framing the matter within a moral and legal context, not least the domestic pressures, including widespread public opposition. This includes France's sizable Muslim population, who expressed fierce opposition to a large-scale invasion of a Middle Eastern country.

Not devoid of self-interest, France's non-aligned position illustrates a careful interplay of domestic, economic, and diplomatic factors while treading carefully not to forgo the moral argument. Cogan (2004, 128) notes that while some criticized France for prioritizing self-interest over allied solidarity, it nevertheless reflects a coherent and rational framework in which self-interest and moral responsibility coexist. With a focus on the principles that underpin international law and on prioritizing dialogue over unilateral military action, France demonstrated how non-alignment, when coupled with moral clarity, can reinforce diplomatic standing, a case exemplifying what is meant by *realpolitik*. In the process, it could withstand significant pressure from its allies, underscoring a strength of conviction that at least appeared credible, thereby bearing the hallmarks of a thoughtful, non-aligned position. This sharply contrasts with the ambiguity and inconsistency in the South African position. If anything, the South African expression of non-alignment raises serious questions about its strategic intent and moral legitimacy.

This contrast becomes even more pronounced when considering the historical context that shapes South Africa's approach. Here, ANC's longstanding alliance with the Soviet Union, rooted in shared struggles against colonialism and apartheid during the Cold War, offers a lens through which its current non-aligned position might be understood. This historical connection points not to a position guided by moral intent but rather something rooted in enduring ideological loyalties. In this case, it appears as if the ANC government's historical affiliation and ideological sympathies prevent them from condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, which are widely recognized as a violation of international law (Brinkel and Carel 2024, 351). The reluctance to denounce Russia's action in Ukraine undermines South Africa's claims to be a neutral arbiter. Moreover, it places the country in an untenable moral position. Announcements of President Cyril Ramaphosa's so-called peace mission seemed to signal a more constructive approach, some suggesting that it appeared to be an attempt to remedy apparent shortcomings (Imray 2023). However, the trip that included other African leaders with planned visits to Moscow and Kyiv fell far short of expectations. While the aim was to facilitate dialogue, the initiative lacked a clear objective to make a meaningful impact. There were no clear objectives nor any tangible outcomes (Orderson 2023). In this sense, the peace mission could be characterized as underwhelming. In the end, the trip symbolized a continuation of the ANC government's stance on refusing to acknowledge Russia's aggression despite the evidence pointing to the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. This omission highlights a broader issue of South Africa prioritizing diplomatic caution over and against taking a principled stance against aggression, further diminishing its credibility as a trustworthy mediator.

3 Reframing South Africa's Stance in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict and Broader Global Dynamics

Whilst problematic, the issue associated with South Africa's non-alignment does not absolve the broader international community, most of whose responses have been equally problematic. Here, Western nations, in particular, have struggled to come to terms with profound historical, political, and structural dynamics in their approach to regional developments. In this sense, the war in Ukraine was not entirely unpredictable given over a century of geopolitical tensions, cultural entanglements, and historical grievances that have plagued this region's peoples. Mankoff (2022) reminds us that with its contested borders, shifting alliances, and unresolved identity crises, Eastern Europe has long been a site of geopolitical friction and existential uncertainty. The escalation of the current conflict, which some analysts argue could have been foreseen as early as 2008 during the Russian-Georgian War, or in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, underscores the cyclical nature of sovereignty disputes left unresolved by the Western powers (Menon and Rumer 2015, 28). If anything, these developments highlight a broader pattern of instability rooted in the tension between the principles of national self-determination and the imposition of external influence – issues emblematic of the broader post-Soviet political landscape.

Solchanyk (1998, 539) reminds us that, at its core, the conflict in Ukraine reflects a struggle between competing frameworks of sovereignty and identity, which Western nations have largely ignored. For instance, regions such as Donetsk and Luhansk have longstanding affinities with Russia. These ties reach beyond political affiliation and extend into culture, history, and linguistic identity, especially as they relate to the broader Slavic world. In other words, there is an internal pluralism in Ukraine that rhetoric on unified sovereignty would find difficult to ignore. According to Solchanyk (1998, 540), this also speaks to the challenges associated with the fragility of understanding what defines the modern nation-state, especially when there is significant ethnic and cultural diversity. In this respect, Ukraine is no different since it also has to address the issue of specific sectors within its citizenry, especially those self-identifying as ethnic Russians who may challenge the coherence of Ukraine's territorial claims. Broadly, these nuances are overlooked by Western commentators, creating a scenario where the right to self-determination enshrined in international law is selectively applied, raising questions about its utility in mitigating instead of exacerbating conflict (Cassese 1995, 125). In emphasizing Ukraine's territorial integrity, the West has primarily disregarded the legitimacy of alternative perspectives, often

dismissing them as the mere justification of Russian expansionism, often ignoring the historical and cultural grievances that drive the origins of the conflict.

Coupled with this, entrenched biases within Western media and academic institutions compound the intellectual deficit in analyzing the conflict. Bashara (2022) reminds us that much of the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war has been shaped by ideological predispositions, resulting in an oversimplified narrative of democracy versus authoritarianism. This framing neglects historical continuities, such as NATO's post-Cold War expansion, which some argue fuels a climate of insecurity and mistrust in Russia (Park 2022, 147–148). NATO's eastward expansion, encompassing former Warsaw Pact states such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania, has been perceived by Moscow as a direct threat to its sphere of influence. Huntington (1996, 37) describes such omissions as a form of historical forgetfulness, wherein policymakers and the public fail to recognize the long-term implications of strategic decisions made in earlier eras. In this way, the conflict between Russia and NATO has fueled a sense of zero-sum thinking in international relations, which leads to mistrust and little opportunity for constructive dialogue.

Along with this, the proliferation of social media has further distorted perceptions of the conflict. Here, much comes in the form of political polarization, where sensationalist elements on both sides of the political and ideological spectrum replace moderate views of the conflict. This is also reflected in the dissemination of information, where the reinforcement of ideological echo chambers undermines the capacity for critical engagement. Sunstein (2018, 63–68) describes this phenomenon as one in which emotionally charged narratives overshadow nuanced analysis. The immediate accessibility of social media amplifies these effects, allowing disinformation to spread and erode the public understanding of the complexities associated with the conflict. This is further compounded by deficiencies in formal education systems, which often fail to equip individuals with the necessary tools to engage historical and geopolitical issues critically. Without such capacities, and as we have observed with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, public discourse becomes embroiled in simplistic analysis rather than informed dialogue.

This tendency is further compounded by underlying Eurocentric and racial biases that shape the prioritization of Global conflicts in international discourse. For example, the disproportionate focus on the Ukraine war, at the expense of crises in Palestine, Yemen, South Sudan, or Libya, among other conflict zones, exemplifies what Said (1978, 227) alluded to as a kind of selective humanism of Western liberalism. The humanitarian disaster in Yemen, fueled by foreign interventions and arms sales to Saudi Arabia, receives scant attention compared to Ukraine's plight, reflecting what McCloskey refers to as a "hierarchy of victims"

(2022, 141) that privileges European conflicts over those involving predominantly black, Muslim, or non-European peoples. Similarly, the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya during the reign of Muammar Gaddafi also highlights the enduring biases of Western interventions. Western nations have proved inconsistent in addressing Global conflicts, indicating that geopolitical interests often precede the principles of universal justice and human rights principles. In this sense, NATO's geopolitical interests are firmly rooted in a Cold War mentality in which an adversarial dynamic is cultivated and maintained. These geopolitical challenges further underscore the shortcomings of a NATO alliance that is too willing to prioritize military action (often through proxies) over and above inclusive dialogue, especially when it concerns strategic interests.

The economic ramifications of these geopolitical decisions extend way beyond the immediate conflict. The continued boycott of Russian energy, designed to isolate Russia, has significantly impacted Global markets. The effects thereof result in fuel shortages in some parts of the world. These shortages led to energy insecurity, resulting in social unrest in parts of Europe and elsewhere. Moreover, Russia's strategic pivot towards emerging powers such as India and China, including other Global South countries, has provided the impetus for a shift in the political landscape, a shift in which we observe a rearrangement of Global alliances away from their traditional Western stronghold. Acharya argues that such realignments signal a shift towards a "multiplex world order" (2017, 276–277), where emerging powers assert greater autonomy in defining the contours of international relations. This development challenges traditional Western dominance and highlights the limitations of punitive economic measures as a tool of diplomacy.

If anything, the unfolding conflict demands the reimagining of conventional notions, not just how the Western nations have traditionally dealt with conflict but, more importantly, how we interrogate concepts of sovereignty and self-determination. For Ukraine, this means that the principle of self-determination, as outlined in the United Nations Charter, must be recognized as the country struggles to come to terms with the diverse aspirations of its population whilst ensuring the integrity of its territorial claims (United Nations 1945, Art. 1[2]). More broadly, the conflict is a reminder that the root causes of Global conflicts, including the structural imbalances that underpin them, will have to be addressed to work towards a more equitable and sustainable future as far as international relations are concerned. In this sense, Western nations will have to come to terms with the lingering effects of their colonial pasts – these systemic inequalities and geopolitical rivalries continue to be a key driver in constraining the agency of countries in the Global South. Overcoming this requires a collective commitment to histories of oppression to establish a Global order where mutual respect and the principles of justice and equity are firmly entrenched. The Rus-

sian-Ukrainian conflict is a cogent reminder that the international community and Western nations, in particular, can only hope to achieve a more inclusive and peaceful world order by confronting their complicity in perpetuating cycles of conflict.

4 Towards a Moral and Just Framework for Global Diplomacy: Revisiting South Africa's Non-Alignment Position

The dilemma of South Africa's non-aligned stance in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, juxtaposed with the West's often neocolonial approach to international disputes, underscores the challenges associated with working towards a just resolution in environments still grappling with the legacies of the past. The contradictions in South Africa's approach to the matter are evidently problematic. They highlight the tension between historical allegiances and the demands of working towards justice in a world that is quite polarized. This tension starkly contrasts with the moral clarity that once defined the Global fight against apartheid – a cause that the ANC championed and used to galvanize international solidarity in defense of justice and human rights. Just as the world once rallied against the injustices of the apartheid system, so too the current Global order requires a commitment to confronting unlawful aggression whilst at the same time upholding the principles of sovereignty and self-determination as outlined by UN statutes.

South Africa's position, characterized by caution and, in some cases, evasion, has sparked intense discussion at home and abroad on the implications of non-alignment, especially in cases where one party in a conflict is the aggressor. The merits of non-alignment, when applied appropriately, are not in question, as we have seen with the examples cited earlier. However, as we observe in the South African case, a distortion risks undermining the principles of justice and equity, which speaks to our existence as a modern nation-state. As a people whose liberation struggle is firmly rooted in appeals to the principles of justice and human rights, our government's reluctance to denounce Russia's aggression in Ukraine sharply contrasts with the values that are enshrined in our post-apartheid constitution. These values, collated in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, emphasize the inviolability of human dignity, equality, and human rights and freedoms (The Republic of South Africa 1996, Section 9–12). In this sense, non-alignment, as pursued by the South African government, is unsustainable simply because it is out of sync with local and international statutes focussed

on international law and human rights conventions. Drawing from our historical experiences of oppression, we are uniquely positioned to advocate an international order that prioritizes dialogue and inclusivity instead of contributing to cultures of divisiveness. Unfortunately, this potential remains unfulfilled as long as the South African government continues to pursue a foreign policy rooted in contradictions and undermines the pursuit of human rights. Similar to how the anti-apartheid movement was galvanized by moral clarity and dedication to justice, current international conflicts, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, require a similar commitment to these ideals. If South Africa is not ready for this, its credibility as far as non-alignment is concerned will be diminished, reducing it to a nation with no more than a convenient political strategy rather than one that is meaningfully contributing to a just social order. Similarly, the international community and the Western nations must be guided by a comprehensive understanding of historical complexities, including their own complicity in contributing to these problems. This requires a departure from simplistic binaries and a return to principles that respect the sovereignty of all people. An acknowledgement of the multifaceted roots of the conflict is needed, including the historical grievances and geopolitical mistakes that have fueled tensions in the region. Above all, a reinvigoration of the principles of non-alignment is called for, not as a passive posture but as an active and moral commitment to promoting peace, sovereignty, and human rights above all else.

Drawing upon these insights, a peaceful resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is possible. However, before one can interpret the potential for a just resolution of the conflict, we must first articulate the profound deformities of the current international system – a system still premised on mistrust, competition, and unequal power dynamics. These deformities are observed in ways in which peace talks are often used as an ideological tool to negotiate power or being masqueraded (misleadingly) as genuine efforts for a just resolution. Unfortunately, while narrowly aimed at preserving our strategic interests, South Africa's non-alignment policy falls far short of anything meaningful. Unfortunately, here, we risk unintentionally participating in power struggles rather than emerging as an honest arbiter who can navigate the arena of international diplomacy through our past struggles and the moral clarity needed in this situation. It is clear that the search for a more meaningful resolution must transcend ideological power plays on both sides of the political spectrum. This creates an environment where nations are not merely passive participants swayed by shifting geopolitical sentiments. South Africa has an opportunity to be an active advocate in upholding the dignity and sovereignty of all peoples, not just those considered political friends, a stark reminder that non-alignment without moral clarity is an abdication of responsibility rather than a contribution to a more meaningful resolution.

5 Concluding Thoughts

Non-alignment necessitates moral coherence and an unyielding commitment to a just resolution of conflict. For this to be realized, South Africa must address the inconsistencies that hamper our efforts to contribute meaningfully to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This also speaks to the need for nations in the Global South to redefine their diplomatic strategies beyond the ideological loyalties. When they do, countries like South Africa have the opportunity to transcend the binaries of Cold War–era geopolitics. Revisiting non-alignment through a contemporary lens offers a pathway towards a more equitable Global order that values inclusivity and justice over expediency. For South Africa, this entails transforming our foreign policy into a model that bridges historical consciousness with the imperatives of creating a more sustainable Global landscape. By prioritizing ethical accountability alongside strategic interest, South Africa could emerge at the forefront of reimagining a Global community that resists hegemony and affirms the shared dignity of all peoples. After all, the challenge lies not in choosing between ethical considerations and pragmatic decisions but reconciling them within a coherent vision for modern diplomacy.

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