

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MAY/JUNE 2023



The Nonaligned World

The West, the Rest, and the
New Global Disorder

The Secret
History of
the Cuban
Missile Crisis

Europe's
Postimperial
Empire

America's
Middle East
Delusions

In Defense of the Fence Sitters

What the West Gets Wrong About Hedging

MATIAS SPEKTOR

As countries in the global South refuse to take a side in the war in Ukraine, many in the West are struggling to understand why. Some speculate that these countries have opted for neutrality out of economic interest. Others see ideological alignments with Moscow and Beijing behind their unwillingness to take a stand—or even a lack of morals. But the behavior of large developing countries can be explained by something much simpler: the desire to avoid being trampled in a brawl among China, Russia, and the United States.

Across the globe, from India to Indonesia, Brazil to Turkey, Nigeria to South Africa, developing countries are increasingly seeking to avoid costly entanglements with the major powers, trying to keep all their options open for maximum flexibility. These countries are pursuing a strategy of hedging because they see the future distribution of global power as uncertain and wish to avoid commitments that will be hard to discharge. With limited resources with which to

influence global politics, developing countries want to be able to quickly adapt their foreign policies to unpredictable circumstances.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, hedgers reason that it is too early to dismiss Russia's staying power. By invading its neighbor, Russia may have made a mistake that will accelerate its long-term decline, but the country will remain a major force to reckon with in the foreseeable future and a necessary player in negotiating an end to the war. Most countries in the global South also see a total Russian defeat as undesirable, contending that a broken Russia would open a power vacuum wide enough to destabilize countries far beyond Europe.

Western countries have been too quick to dismiss this rationale for neutrality, viewing it as an implicit defense of Russia or as an excuse to normalize aggression. In Washington and various European capitals, the global South's response to the war in Ukraine is seen as making an already difficult problem harder. But such frustrations with

MATIAS SPEKTOR is Professor of International Relations at Fundação Getúlio Vargas in São Paulo, a Nonresident Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and a Visiting Scholar at Princeton University.

hedgers are misguided—the West is ignoring the opportunity created by large developing countries' growing disillusionment with the policies of Beijing and Moscow. As long as these countries feel a need to hedge their bets, the West will have an opportunity to court them. But to improve relations with developing countries and manage the evolving global order, the West must take the concerns of the global South—on climate change, trade, and much else—seriously.

ONE FOOT IN

Hedging is not a new strategy. Secondary powers have long used it to manage risks. But in recent years, a growing number of influential states from the postcolonial world have embraced this approach. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for example, has developed strong diplomatic and commercial ties with China, Russia, and the United States simultaneously. For Modi, hedging acts as an insurance policy. Should conflict erupt among the major powers, India could profit by aligning with the most powerful side or joining a coalition of weaker states to deter the strongest one.

As a strategy for managing a multipolar world, hedging entails keeping the channels of communication open with all the players. This is easier said than done. Under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, for example, Brazil has condemned Russia's unlawful invasion of Ukraine but has also declined European requests to send military equipment to Kyiv. Lula reasoned that refusing to criticize Moscow would impede dialogue with U.S. President Joe Biden, and selling weap-

ons to the Western coalition would undermine his ability to talk to Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a result, Brazilian officials have made boilerplate calls for an end to the fighting without doing anything that might trigger a backlash from either Washington or Moscow.

Hedging can be difficult to sustain over time, and a state's ability to do so often depends on its domestic politics. Political constituencies can jeopardize hedging strategies when their economic interests are at stake. In 2019, for example, Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, sought to counterbalance Brazil's growing dependence on China by courting support from U.S. President Donald Trump. In response, the powerful farming caucus in the Brazilian Congress stopped Bolsonaro in his tracks, anticipating that farmers would lose market access in China if the president pressed ahead with his pivot.

Hedging also inevitably involves disappointing allies when national interests are at stake. For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has publicly affirmed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sent Kyiv humanitarian aid. But his government has avoided being drawn into the conflict, despite Turkey being a NATO member with strong and valuable ties to the United States and the EU. Erdogan recognizes that Turkey cannot afford to alienate Russia because Moscow wields influence over areas of major interest to Ankara, including the Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Syria.

Hedgers are wary of economic interdependence because it weakens their sovereignty. As a result, they

seek to strengthen domestic markets and national self-reliance, promoting industrialization and building up vital sectors such as transportation, energy, and defense. This has been the approach taken by Southeast Asia's largest economy. Indonesia under President Joko Widodo has courted Chinese and Western investment to reverse two decades of deindustrialization. Because taking sides in the war in Ukraine could jeopardize these plans, he has studiously sought to stand above the fray. In 2022, he was one of only a few world leaders to have met with Biden, Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Since hedgers value freedom of action, they may form partnerships of convenience to pursue specific foreign policy objectives, but they are unlikely to forge general alliances. This differentiates today's hedgers from nonaligned countries during the Cold War. Amid the bipolar competition of that era, nonaligned developing states rallied around a shared identity to demand greater economic justice, racial equality, and the end of colonial rule. To that end, they formed enduring coalitions in multilateral institutions. By contrast, hedging today is about avoiding the pressure to choose between China, Russia, and the United States. It is a response to the rise of a new, multipolar world.

DO AS I SAY, NOT AS I DO

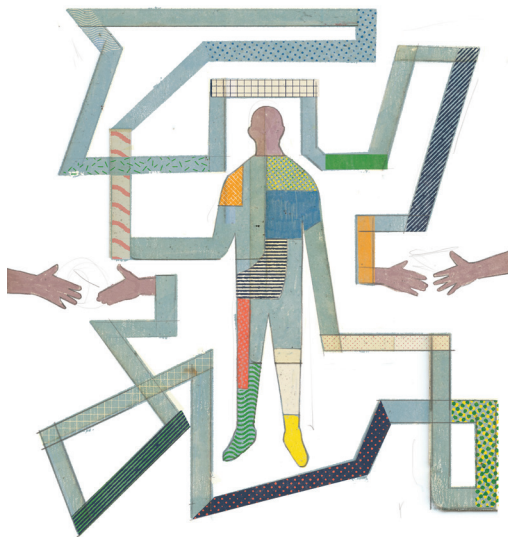
For countries in the global South, hedging is not just a way to extract material concessions. The strategy is informed by these countries' histories with the great powers and their

conviction that the United States, in particular, has been hypocritical in its dealings with the developing world. Consider the reaction of many in the global South to a speech by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris at the Munich Security Conference in February. Harris told an audience of Western leaders that Russia's atrocities were "an attack on our common humanity." She described the horrors of war and the forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, some of whom were separated from their children. "No nation is safe in a world where . . . a country with imperialist ambitions can go unchecked," she added. Ukraine, Harris declared, should be seen as a test for the "international rules-based order."

Across the global South, leaders know that Russia's behavior in Ukraine has been barbaric and inhumane. Yet from their vantage point, Harris's speech only underscored Western hypocrisy. As the Chilean diplomat Jorge Heine pointed out, the United States cannot expect other countries to sanction Russia for its brutality in Ukraine when Washington is supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia for its proxy war against Iran in Yemen, which has resulted in the unlawful killing of thousands of civilians, the destruction of a rich cultural heritage, and the displacement of millions of people. The moral high ground requires consistency between values and actions.

Furthermore, most countries in the global South find it difficult to accept Western claims of a "rules-based order" when the United States and its allies frequently violate the rules—committing atrocities in their various wars,

mistreating migrants, dodging internationally binding rules to curb carbon emissions, and undermining decades of multilateral efforts to promote trade and reduce protectionism, for instance. Western calls for developing nations to be “responsible stakeholders” ring hollow in much of the global South.



The developing world also sees hypocrisy in Washington’s framing of its competition with Beijing and Moscow as a battle between democracy and autocracy. After all, the United States continues to selectively back authoritarian governments when it serves U.S. interests. Of the 50 countries that Freedom House counts as “dictatorships,” 35 received military aid from the U.S. government in 2021. It should be no surprise, then, that many in the global South view the West’s pro-democracy rhetoric as motivated by self-interest rather than a genuine commitment to liberal values.

As frustrating as it is to countries in the global South, Western hypocrisy has an upside: it gives developing countries a lever they can pull to effect change. Because the United States and its European allies appeal to moral principles to justify many of their decisions, third parties can publicly criticize them and demand reparation when those principles are inconsistently applied. Developing countries have no such leverage over China and Russia since neither couches its foreign policy preferences in terms of universal moral values.

THE MORE, THE MERRIER?

Many in the West associate a multipolar world order with conflict and instability, preferring a dominant United States, as was the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not so among countries in the global South, where the prevailing view is that multipolarity could serve as a stable foundation for international order in the twenty-first century.

Part of this reasoning is informed by recent memory. People in developing countries remember the post-Cold War unipolar moment as a violent time—with wars in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Iraq. Unipolarity also coincided with the unsettling influx of global capital into eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. As the scholar Nuno Monteiro warned, when U.S. hegemony is unchecked, Washington becomes capricious, picking fights against recalcitrant states or letting peripheral regional conflicts fester.

Memories of bipolarity in the global South are no better. From

the perspective of many developing countries, the Cold War was cold only in that it did not lead to an earth-extinguishing confrontation between two nuclear-armed superpowers. Outside Europe and North America, the second half of the twentieth century was red hot, with political violence spreading across and within many countries. Bipolarity was not marked by stable competition along the Iron Curtain but by bloody superpower interventions in the peripheries of the globe.

Yet hedgers from the global South are optimistic about multipolarity for reasons beyond history. One prevalent belief is that a diffusion of power will give developing countries more breathing space since intense security competition among the great powers will make it harder for the strong to impose their will on weaker states. Another common view is that rivalries among the great powers will make them more responsive to appeals for justice and equality from smaller states, since the strong must win the global South's favor to compete with their rivals. A third view is that diffuse power will open opportunities for small states to voice their opinions in international institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. When they do, global institutions will begin to reflect a wider range of perspectives, increasing the overall legitimacy of these international bodies.

But such optimism about the prospects of a multipolar order may be unwarranted. Security competition in multipolar systems may push the great powers to create stricter hierarchies around them, limiting chances

for smaller states to express their preferences. For example, the United States has cajoled many countries into pushing back against Chinese influence, shrinking their freedom of action. Furthermore, the great powers might act in concert to repress calls for justice and equality from smaller countries, as the so-called Holy Alliance among Austria, Prussia, and Russia did in the nineteenth century, when it quashed nationalist and liberal grassroots movements across Europe. In the past, great powers have maintained their authority by excluding and imposing their will on others. The victors of World War II, for example, appointed themselves as the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, cementing their power within multilateral institutions. It is far from obvious that developing countries will fare better under multipolarity than they did under previous global orders.

RISE OF THE MIDDLEMEN

The prevalence of hedging among the major countries of the global South presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the United States. The challenge is that hedging could magnify security competition among Beijing, Moscow, and Washington, as developing countries play the three great powers off one another. As a result, the United States may need to offer more concessions than it has in the past to persuade developing countries to cooperate and strike bargains.

The opportunity for Washington is that hedgers are unlikely to permanently join forces with Beijing or Moscow. Across the global South,

moreover, people are increasingly open to engagement with the West. The populations of most developing countries are young, energetic, and impatient, striving to create a world order in which they can thrive. Among the global South's cultural and economic elites and grassroots movements, influential voices are pushing for progressive reforms that could provide a foundation for cooperation with the West.

To win friends in a multipolar world, the United States should start taking the concerns of the global South more seriously. Adopting a condescending stance or, worse, shutting these countries out of the conversation entirely is a recipe for trouble. Major developing countries are not only indispensable partners in tackling climate change and preventing global economic turmoil but also in managing China's rise and Russia's reassertion of power.

Engaging these countries will take humility and empathy on the part of U.S. policymakers, who are not used to either. Crucially, the United States should pay close attention to the global South's grievances with China. Rather than pressuring countries to sever ties with Beijing, Washington should quietly encourage them to test the limits of Chinese friendship for themselves. Developing countries increasingly recognize that China can be just as much of a bully as established Western powers.

The United States must also drop the expectation that the global South will automatically follow the West. Large and influential developing countries can never be true insiders in the liberal international order. They will, therefore,

seek to pursue their own interests and values within international institutions and contest Western understandings of legitimacy and fairness.

But the West and the global South can still cooperate. History provides a guide. For the better part of the twentieth century, postcolonial countries challenged the West on a number of issues, pushing for decolonization, racial equality, and economic justice. Relations were tense. Yet a commitment to diplomacy ensured that the West and the developing world could jointly benefit from international norms and institutions governing topics as varied as trade, human rights, navigation of the seas, and the environment. Today, the West and the global South do not need to aim for total consensus, but they should work together to reach mutually beneficial outcomes.

One promising area for cooperation is adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. The United States and EU countries have made rapid progress within their own borders, opening a window of opportunity for engaging large developing states. Another area ripe for partnership between the West and the global South is international trade, an arena in which more balanced relationships are possible.

The countries of the global South are poised to hedge their way into the mid-twenty-first century. They hedge not only to gain material concessions but also to raise their status, and they embrace multipolarity as an opportunity to move up in the international order. If it wants to remain first among the great powers in a multipolar world, the United States must meet the global South on its own terms. 🌐