

Ukraine: What the global south thinks

by GWYNNE DYER

There is a deep and growing rift between 'the West' and 'the Rest' about the need to resist and defeat the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is because it is really a war in defence of sovereignty, which ought to be something every sovereign country can buy into - but Western governments publicly insist that it is a war in defence of democracy.

All the chatter about democracy goes down well in Europe and North America, but it reeks of hypocrisy elsewhere. Three centuries of imperialism and conspicuous Western failures to defend democracy in the recent past and present in Africa, the Middle East and Asia make these claims sound absurd to people in the developing world.

So Brazil's President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva says in China two weeks ago that 'the United States needs to stop encouraging war and start talking about peace' in Ukraine.

Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, in Brazil a little later, says that 'We are grateful to our Brazilian friends for their excellent understanding of this situation's genesis.'

US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby accuses Lula of 'parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda', but from Indonesia to South Africa to Brazil you hear the same sort of talk.

Rather than join the embargo on trade with Russia, they buy Russian oil and gas at a big discount and make no distinction between the aggressor and the defender. There's a lot of self-interest in this, but there is also a genuine incomprehension about why Western countries care so much about the invasion of Ukraine.

The West didn't care a fig about Saudi Arabia's decade-long military intervention in Yemen. Its only visible concern in war-torn Sudan is getting its own citizens out. Yet it pours money and arms into Ukraine even as soaring energy prices and crushing debt hit living standards and destabilize governments all across the developing world.

The 'Global South' sees only double standards and racism in this. Do the Ukrainians matter more because they are white Europeans? Good question.

The West hasn't helped its case by claiming that its aid to Ukraine is part of a global struggle for democracy. That is not an argument that appeals to authoritarian regimes. They would be much more receptive to an argument based on sovereignty, so why do we hear so little about that?

Western governments stick to the 'democracy in danger' line because it resonates far better with their own domestic audiences than some abstract legal argument about defending the international law on the inviolability of borders. However, it's Ukraine's whole independent existence that's at risk, not just its political system.

Russian president Vladimir Putin definitely doesn't like democracy, and he has been very hostile when countries on Russian's own borders have democratic revolutions. But the idea that he has embarked on some crusade to crush democracy - indeed, that his ambitions extend beyond the former borders of the old Soviet Union in any way - is simply ludicrous.

In practice, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the heritage project gone wrong of an ageing dictator. Putin wanted to build a monument to himself by unifying the three countries that were known as 'all the Russias' under the Russian Empire (now Russia, Belarus and Ukraine).

They all speak Eastern Slavic languages, but so what? The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia all speak Western Slavic

languages, but they are independent countries. Putin's dream was a folly that could only be achieved by force ? and it turned out that he didn't have quite enough force, because the rest of Europe stood in the way.

The West's countries didn't come unanimously to Ukraine's defence because they loved Ukrainians. They did so because Russia was breaking the sacred post-1945 rule on which the United Nations was founded: borders may no longer be changed by force. Conquest, hitherto the motor of most historical change, is henceforth illegal.

This revolutionary change was only accepted because nuclear weapons turned war into an apocalyptic, existential threat. It is taken most seriously in the developed countries, whose wars were already the most destructive, but it has also spared many countries in the Global South from cross-border wars that would have been inevitable under the old rules.

The new rules have been broken too, most notably in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, but they have been respected over the past 77 years to an extent that would amaze our ancestors. That's the real principle that Western countries see at stake in Ukraine: inviolable sovereignty, not 'democracy'.

Would it be worth the West's while to explain more clearly what its real bottom line is in Ukraine? No, probably not. Nobody in the developing countries would believe it, even though it happens to be true.