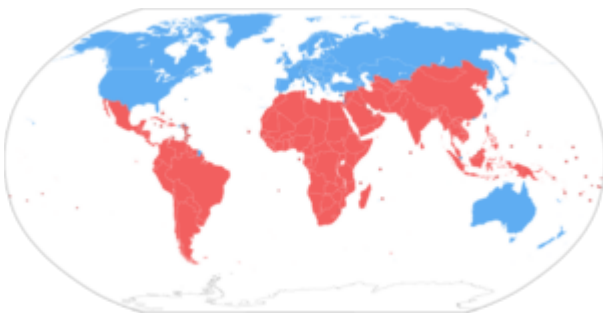


# What's Wrong with Ukraine's Wartime Diplomacy in the Global South

April 14, 2023



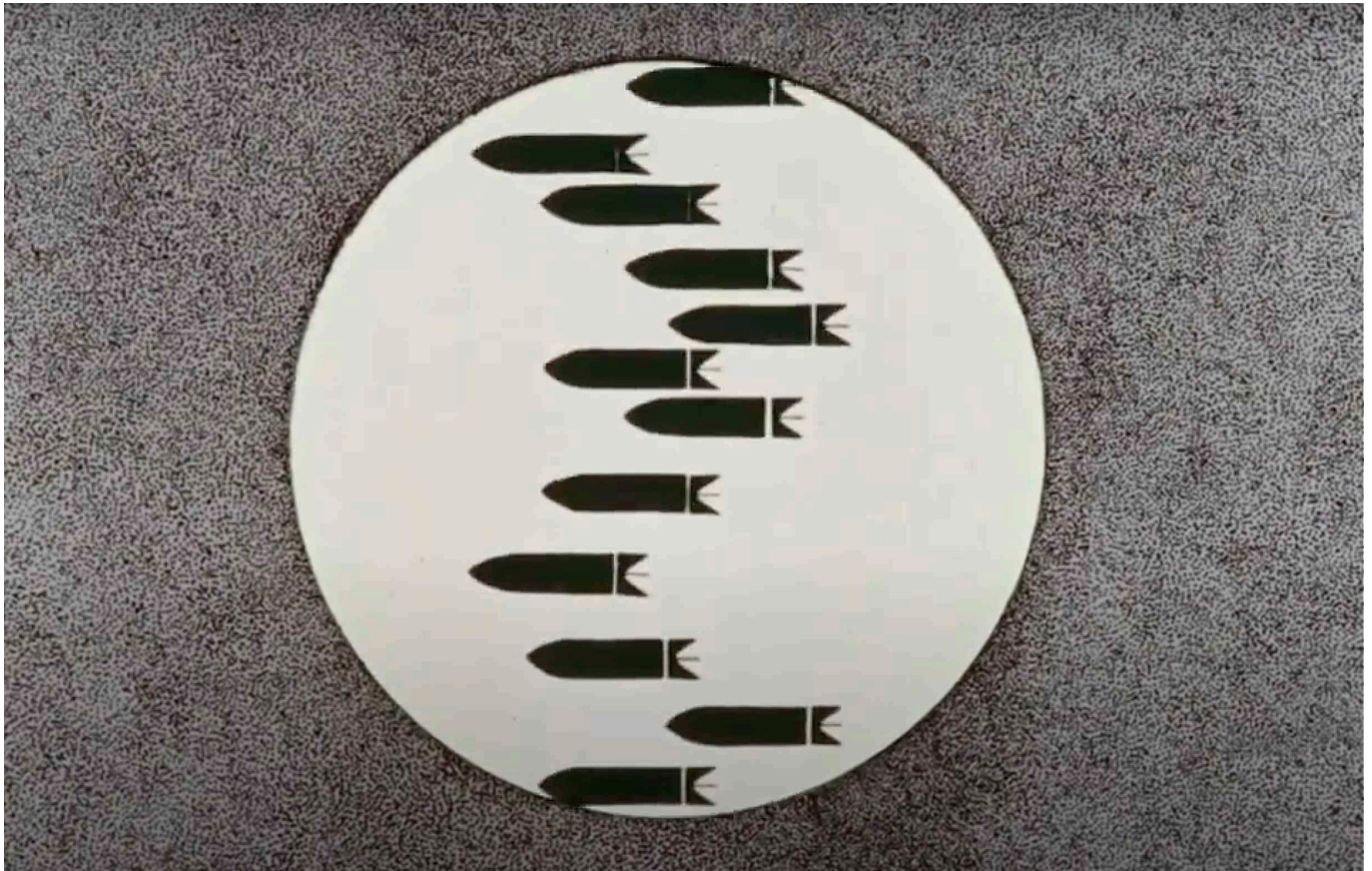
In the month of the first anniversary of Russia's illegal and brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, president Volodymyr Zelensky held a speech at the European Parliament, where he declared Russia to be "the biggest anti-European force of the modern world"<sup>[1]</sup>. By "European", he meant its ostensibly "way of life steeped in rules, values, equality, and fairness" and "a place where Ukraine is firmly at home". One year into the Russian invasion, it is about time to present my long-standing and simmering criticism of Ukraine's civilizational and exclusionary approach to wartime diplomacy for rallying international support so far, especially in the global south.

It is indeed difficult to understate the degree of depoliticization, cynicism for fellow human beings and communal life, and a sense of hopelessness about the present and future that have taken Russian society by unabated storm in recent decades. But when struggles are presently taking place not only in Ukraine but also elsewhere in the world, including in Myanmar, Thailand, Sudan, and Palestine, for the very same values of universal human dignity, equality, and fairness, then civilizational and inherently exclusionary pretensions about what kind of a national and global future in terms of values one is fighting for becomes fundamentally problematic.

On February 20th 2023, when I publicly criticized a prominent Ukrainian intellectual, Volodymyr Yermolenko, and his argument [in a now deleted twitter thread written on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023] that Russia's war on Ukraine was making Russia become "more Asian" and that Ukraine's struggle for its national survival was "extending Europe's borders eastwards", I was surprised at the amount of support and interest in my counter-arguments. Such interest was also shared publicly and privately by many Ukrainians who are currently fighting not only against an invading Russian army and an excessively chauvinist Kremlin regime but also against a wholesale government-initiated neoliberalisation of their motherland.

In this occasion, I would like to elaborate my constructive criticism of Ukraine's wartime diplomacy in the global south, especially from the position of someone who has been most strongly against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. My main argument is that Ukraine's civilizational and exclusionary approach has been self-constraining, self-defeating and even half-hearted in genuity when it comes

to achieving a more respectable and broader appeal, support, and a sense of a shared struggle in many countries of the global south.



A frame from the Chris Marker's film "Far From Vietnam"

## The concept of the civilizational and global south

By "civilizational" and "exclusionary", my conceptual thoughts are in the spirit of Amartya Sen's criticism of Samuel Huntington's take of world history as that of a constant clash of civilizations and a permanent state of war and conflict-ready tensions between peoples, rooted in some imagined, nativist, destined and spatially fixated cultural supremacies, glories and values<sup>[2]</sup>. A civilizational approach is inherently exclusionary, and therefore anti-universal and anti-humanist grounded on a rather misguided understanding of the roots behind many modern problems afflicting Ukraine and elsewhere, including wars of conquest, oppression, and exploitation.

In spite of their burgeoning contemporary crises and hypocrisies - post-WWII Europe's (including Western and Eastern Europe) many major achievements in their attempts of "social state" building and relative freedoms have been nothing less short of worthy of a revolutionary progressive standing in human history. However, ongoing struggles in the rest of the world to enjoy the same values aren't for an exclusively new "European" future as such, but for a more universally shared, equal and humane future. This is a torch of struggle that Ukraine's government and its many prominent intellectuals are attempting to carry, but arguably self-constrainedly so in their approach to wartime diplomacy. This is ultimately shaped, I believe, by Ukraine's dominant domestic politics and sociology in their search for a viable post-communist self-identification in at least the last three decades<sup>[3][4]</sup>.

I am often reluctant to use the all-encompassing term "the global south", as the term has since at least the 1970s devalued itself into a term without much cohesive and united political meaning,



organizational front, and alternative vision for a more progressive, just, and equal world order at the level of the nation-state. As the Indian activist, Kavita Krishnan, and Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, have cautiously warned, the dominant domestic politics and ideologies behind some of the major countries now advocating for a new “multipolar” world order are themselves steeped in crude civilizational and imperial conservatism. The current ruling powers of some of such major countries, being formal electoral democracies themselves, are even aiding creeping illiberalism and ethnic and religious majoritarianism within their ostensibly democratic societies. Yet, this new multipolarity is presented as an alternative politics and world order to US unilateralism and criminal abuse of international laws with impunity<sup>[5]</sup>. In reality, the meaning of such alternative politics is rather a politics of desiring the same privilege to abuse international laws with impunity and put a final end to sovereign equality by the expectations of so-called pre-destined “spheres of influence”. According to the Chinese anthropologist, Xiang Biao, “mainstream opinion in China today is not talking about doing something different, but about becoming number one, and many basic ways of thinking are similar to what we see in the US, which to my mind has to do with our loss of common ideals”<sup>[6]</sup>. Similarly in India’s case, the columnist Happymon Jacob convincingly argues that “what New Delhi is really after is a seat at the high table of international politics. Its revisionist language is rooted in its desire to be part of a restructured status quo”<sup>[7]</sup>.



Kavita Krishnan speaks at the protest. Photo: Twitter | @IamDeepaMehta

In making my criticism of Ukraine’s wartime diplomacy to forge international support in the global south, I will reluctantly but conveniently refer to the “global south” as a broad target community of various social stratas but with a largely shared history and consciousness of past Western colonial rule and contemporary hypocrisies in the West’s selective obedience to international laws, wars, and conflicts. In particular, my criticism applies for global south countries with previously strong ties and often overall positive experiences with the former Soviet Union (USSR).

## Ukraine’s wartime diplomacy in Indonesia

In the past year, several episodes by Ukraine’s wartime diplomats in the global south made me critical of the country’s overall approach to wartime diplomacy. I was in Indonesia during that time

as a UN personnel, where I anecdotally witnessed the country's immediate and evolving reactions to Russia's invasion. Indonesia's complexities are such that, while it was practically a firm US ally under the conditions of a domestic military dictatorship (1965-1998), it's also a country whose many social stratas continue to have fond appreciation and memories of the USSR (though disproportionately associated with Russia), especially in the spheres of culture, education, and a past shared politics of moving forward a non-capitalist decoloniality and world order<sup>[8]</sup>.

To begin with, I disagree with commentators who overstate Indonesia's official neutrality to the invasion. The Indonesian government has consistently been voting in favour of all UN General Assembly resolutions so far that have called for honouring Ukraine's legitimate territorial integrity and sovereignty and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Moreover, as the chair of the G20 Summit in 2022, Indonesia's president Joko Widodo (or "Jokowi") and his wife, Iriana Joko Widodo, painstakingly paid a visit to Kyiv via a 20-hour train trip from Poland as the first statesman from the global south having visited wartime Ukraine. Comparatively speaking, there are very little expectations for prime minister Narendra Modi of India, the chair of the G20 Summit in 2023, to pay such a visit to Kyiv. The visit made by the Indonesian president and his wife was therefore powerfully symbol enough, in spite of its arguably limited practical impact on Kyiv and Moscow's continuing wartime strategies and policies. Moreover, while the G20 Summit is usually confined to be an economic forum, Indonesia as the chair still allowed president Volodymyr Zelensky to present his 10-point peace plan at the summit for the first time to the world<sup>[9]</sup>.



President of Indonesia Joko Widodo and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. Photo: Office of the President

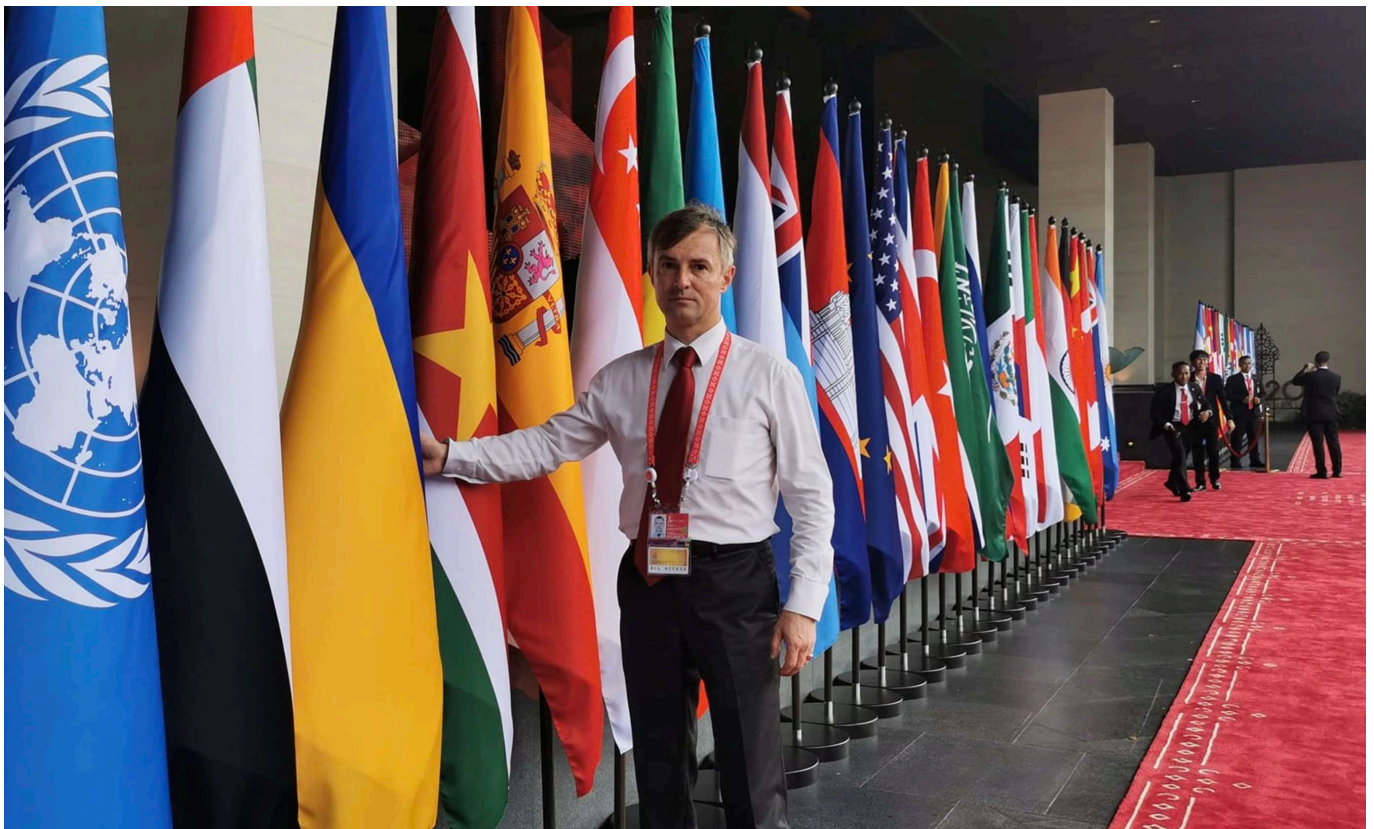
However, several months into the invasion, as I sat down for a meal with a colleague from an embassy of a European country that has been among the most supportive of Ukraine's war efforts, we unanimously concluded from our discussions that the public sentiment in Indonesia was largely that of sympathy for Russia and cynical reluctance towards Ukraine. Over another meal, a local staff



from the European country's embassy and a devout Muslim, told me: "as much as I dislike Russia's treatment of its Muslim-majority ethnic minorities [Chechens] and their war mobilizations that drag Muslims to fight against other Muslims in Ukraine, I feel that Zelensky is selling his country". I did not respond to her statement, though my thinking and internal reflections only deepened further. However, I disagree when such sentiments are explanatory reduced to the mere impact of being due to "Russian information propaganda", enchanting as they are by itself.

Diplomacy, be it during war and peacetime, isn't only about maximizing one's country's national interests by the standard notions of *realpolitik*, but also conveying to the world what values and future you would like the world to understand and most preferably share with you in mutual solidarity, respect, and admiration. In this task, Ukrainian wartime diplomatic efforts so far deserve much scorn, and I will outline a few examples as follows.

In a statement published on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022, Ukraine's ambassador to Indonesia, Vasyl Hamianin, sought to invoke support from both the Indonesian government and its public in two rather distinguished ways<sup>[10]</sup>. One way was to draw similarities between Indonesia's past anti-colonial wars of independence, notably against the Dutch and the Japanese, and Ukraine's ongoing war of defence against a Russian conquest. Hamianin also emphasized that the invasion of his country was a threat to world peace and the post-WWII international security order. As Indonesia's ambassador to Germany, Arif Havas Oegroseno, in a separate commentary rightfully argued, the invasion does pose existential ramifications for other smaller states that continue to clinch on the international laws to defend their territorial integrity and sovereignty against great-power state bullying, such as Indonesia's dealing of China in the South China Sea<sup>[11]</sup>. At the same time, however, Hamianin invoked Indonesia's bloody past of anti-communism: "you [Indonesia] are a wise nation that were able to ward off the communists' seductions and not to submit to them". Hamianin went further to claim that "today's Russia is a continuation of the communist regime".



Ambassador of Ukraine to Indonesia Vasyl Hamianin. Photo: Facebook | Vasyl Gamyandin

As much as a brewing Islamic populism and anti-communism continue to go hand-in-hand in

contemporary Indonesian politics, the evocation of memories from among the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most bloody massacres – in 1965, which left 500,000 up to 1 million people dead – is by itself abhorrent and lacking in basic professional, political, and moral sensibility in diplomatic conduct. Indonesia's president, Jokowi, was first elected in 2014 in part by an election promise to courageously push forward a national reconciliation and healing agenda for the many silenced victims of the 1965 anti-communist massacres across Indonesia. For years, the president had been faced with tremendous opposition to push this agenda by powerful forces within Indonesia's military and Islamic establishments. At last, on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2023, the president formally extended the Indonesian state's "deep regrets" and acknowledgment that the 1965 massacres indeed took place, alongside 11 other "gross human rights violations" between 1965 and 2003<sup>[12]</sup>. On what sensible grounds did Hamianin believe that it was appropriate to intervene and even go against a long-standing political and historically sensitive agenda within Indonesia, that of gradual reconciliation and more historical candidness about the 1965 massacres?

With Hamianin, it does not end by the above episode. Another, even more disturbing episode, took place in relation to Israel's air strikes against Gaza from August 5<sup>th</sup> 2022, which the Indonesian government resolutely condemned<sup>[13]</sup>. This is well in accordance with its historical tradition of solidarity with Palestine, being among the few countries in the world that still do not have formal diplomatic bilateral relations with the state of Israel. The year of 2022 was indeed the deadliest year in the last seven years in terms of Israeli and Palestinian civilian casualties, most disproportionally for the Palestinians<sup>[14]</sup>. In response to Indonesia's condemnation of Israel's escalatory violence in Gaza, Hamianin tweeted in full caps lock: "how about strong condemnation of brutal attacks on Ukraine during the last five months? And deaths of hundreds if not thousands of children, including Muslim kids?"<sup>[15]</sup>. Shortly afterwards in a rather tragi-comic context, Ukraine's ambassador to Israel, Yevgen Korniychuk, released a public statement, saying: "As a Ukrainian whose country is under a brutal and prolonged attack by its nearest neighbour, I feel great sympathy for the Israeli public. Terrorism and malicious attacks against civilians have become the daily routine of Israelis and Ukrainians"<sup>[16]</sup>. The Ukrainian ministry of foreign affairs would later retweet Korniychuk's statement. Deservingly, the Indonesian ministry of foreign affairs quickly summoned Hamianin, having expressed their "displeasure and resentment" over comments deemed "hurtful for Indonesians who consider Ukrainians as friends"<sup>[17]</sup>.



Ambassador of Ukraine to Israel Yevhen Korniychuk. Photo: Getty Images

To re-affirm, the Indonesian government has not been officially neutral over Russia's war against Ukraine, though domestic debates have been taking place on what Indonesia could've potentially done more for Ukraine. Nevertheless, in Hamianin's mind, there seems to be a conflict of values between raising the Ukrainian cause and the plea of Palestinian children under disproportionate attacks and violence by the state of Israel. One may ask Hamianin why Indonesia's condemnation over Israel's escalatory violence goes against his own country's cause and worldview, and what kind of a diplomatic business it was for him nonetheless to openly attack Indonesia's position on another major [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict in the world. In terms of strategy for rallying international support, let alone morality, in what way did Hamianin find it beneficial to further alienate large segments of the Indonesian public, where there is no other comparable international conflict that have galvanized many Indonesians for decades as much as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the cause of Palestinian statehood and freedom? This is exemplary of a civilizational and exclusionary approach to wartime diplomacy in that Hamianin, representing the Ukrainian government, finds it unable to recognize similar struggles for the same values of universal human dignity, equality, and fairness, unless they are spatially part of or peripheral to Europe as the epitome of civilization.

## **Ukraine's wartime diplomacy in Vietnam and the relevance of Vietnam's past experience**

There are no pretensions about the reality that the US has been and remains the most significant external rearguard behind Ukraine's war of defence against Russia, materially, financially, and militarily. Understandably, US and Ukrainian wartime diplomatic efforts have therefore been well-coordinated and largely in unison, so far. Yet, one episode needs to be called out. On March 10th 2022, in refuting Russia's allegations of US biological weapons programmes being run in Ukraine, the US embassy in Vietnam released a brazen statement which said: "Russia, not the United States,



has a long and well-documented track of using chemical weapons”<sup>[18][19]</sup>. This statement naturally engulfed the embassy’s official Facebook page with local Vietnamese repugnance, as well as indirectly promoted further trivialization of the ongoing suffering of the Ukrainian people. By official Vietnamese estimates, 3 to 4.8 million people in Vietnam were exposed to Agent Orange, a defoliant that contained some of the most ferociously toxic chemicals as dioxin and was deployed in the US’ chemical warfare against communist insurgencies and local populations across South Vietnam between 1961 and 1971<sup>[20]</sup>. With official local estimates suggesting that 25% of southern Vietnamese land areas were sprayed with Agent Orange, some have gone far as to having called out the US’ past “ecocide” in Vietnam<sup>[21]</sup>. Unfortunately, some diplomats within Ukraine’s embassy in Vietnam have also been caught publicly quoting and promoting the controversial far-right figure, Stepan Bandera.



Spraying of the herbicide Agent Orange by the US military in Vietnam. Photo: nytimes.com

Similar as in Indonesia, in Vietnam there were at times (especially in the early phases of Russia’s invasion) widespread local sympathy for Russia’s stated justifications for attacking Ukraine, rooted in an affinity for anti-Western and particularly anti-US hegemonisms centered around beliefs and discourses largely in terms of great power geopolitics<sup>[22]</sup>. Even more profoundly than in Indonesia, significant segments of people of various social strata in Vietnam continue to hold deep-seated appreciation and cherishing memory of the USSR. Unlike Ukraine, Russia’s wartime diplomacy has so far been successful at pitching up and connecting with such local memories, though by a dishonest portrayal of the contemporary Russian state as the continuing heir of the USSR in spite of president Vladimir Putin and his party United Russia’s own outspoken abomination of the USSR. For instance, all the remarks denouncing the late Russian Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, made by president Vladimir Putin in his speeches declaring an attack on Ukraine were removed from their Vietnamese translations. To many Vietnamese who are simultaneously sympathetic to Ukraine and fond of the historical USSR, especially among the older generations, the current war is seen as one between two formerly socialist and brotherly nations of Vietnam, a war of symbolically tremendous sadness and as a final culmination in the long collapse and negation of the USSR (by both the current governments of Russia and Ukraine).

The Soviet project is perceived by many in Vietnam as once a multi-ethnic and internationalist



project that served as an alternative model of rapid economic, social, and human development and a more just decolonial world order with world-influential ramifications, especially for various early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese independence movements. During the US invasion, when thousands of military and technical advisors from the USSR served on the ground in Vietnam, over 500 surviving members today belong to the All Ukrainian War Veterans Union alone. Following the US military withdrawal in 1973 and the reunification of Vietnam into a communist state in 1975, it was largely the USSR and the Eastern Bloc that helped a war-ravaged Vietnam fill its acute human capital gaps and train its modern state-builders (engineers, agronomists, geologists, economists, teachers, architects, and so on). In particular, the assistance from the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic in alleviating unified Vietnam's many hunger crises by subsidised crops exports, offering maintenance services of military hardware, and educational opportunities was indispensable. This support happened under the harsh external conditions of an aggressive US and Chinese-led international blockade of humanitarian aid, trade, and other assistance to the country. Until the pursuit of higher education in the West became more available from the early 1990s and onwards, the opportunity to study in the USSR was once considered as a dream attained by many Vietnamese and millions of others in the poorer parts of the world. Even among the plentiful of former Vietnamese students in the USSR, from prominent lawmakers to military generals who have come out to publicly condemn Russia's war on Ukraine, they have unambiguously begun their statements by an outpouring of gratitude for their many youthful years previously spent in the USSR.



A frame from the Chris Marker's film "Far From Vietnam"

Understandably, comparisons between wartime Ukraine and Vietnam have been made, in which some have argued that Ukraine is "the Vietnam of the 21<sup>st</sup> century"<sup>[23]</sup>. I have personally so far avoided this comparison. Formally speaking, the Vietnam war (1955-75) was as much as a civil war of competing domestic visions of independent Vietnamese statehood as a continuation of Western

interventionist imperialism of the French and the Americans. There certainly exists different competing visions and dreams of a “new wartime and post-war Ukraine” among the Ukrainians. But presently polls and anecdotal stories seem to suggest an undoubtably united popular front and opinion to first and foremost repel the Russian invaders out of Ukraine’s internationally recognized territories. The conflict in the Donbass region since 2014 will likely require a process of national reconciliation in Ukraine’s post-war era, as it does to some extent carry the nature of being both a civil war and involving a disproportionate role of Russian interventionist invasion and illegitimate control of some parts of Ukraine’s Donbass region (and Crimea) prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022.

For convenience, I will refer to present-day “Vietnam” as the communist and winning side of the Vietnam war led by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG) in South Vietnam. From the official perspective of both Vietnam and Ukraine, they were both once and presently unjustly invaded by a giant great power with imperialist ambitions of control and dominance over their respective and legitimate political independences. But more substantively, in terms of the political and ideological nature of Vietnam and Ukraine, which translates into their distinct approaches to wartime diplomacy for rallying international support, they are vastly different.

## **The difference between a civilizational and an universalist wartime diplomacy for decoloniality**

On December 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, Ukraine’s minister of culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, characterized Russia’s war as “a civilizational battle over culture and history” in his call for an international boycott of Russian culture<sup>[24]</sup>. As the Dutch historian, Ian Buruma, has argued, this strategy is likely to be counterproductive in rallying for international support, including that of ordinary Russian people<sup>[25]</sup>. Despite myself being well-aware of the unabating genocidal and dehumanizing war-rhetoric towards the Ukrainians as a whole that have infested Russian television debates and media commentaries throughout the ongoing war, I am largely sympathetic to Buruma’s view.



Ukraine's minister of culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko. Photo: Facebook | Oleksandr Tkachenko

This returns to my fundamental point about the self-constraining and self-defeating approach of Ukraine's wartime diplomacy confined to a civilizational worldview of the invasion itself and many other contemporary problems of the current age. For Vietnam, its wartime diplomacy was not about promoting a civilizational decoloniality and a struggle for a return to an ancient and imagined civilizational past as a solution to modern questions as colonialism and imperialism. It was about promoting the universality of national liberation, civil rights, and solidarity movements led by various social strata that were simultaneously taking place across the world and regarded as that of a shared struggle for Vietnam, particularly in the lands of the enemy governments of the US and France<sup>[26]</sup>. It was about creating a new and potentially more just world along non-capitalist relations of international solidarity. When Nguyễn Thị Bình, a female communist revolutionary activist and diplomat, was appointed by then president of the DRVN, Hồ Chí Minh, to lead the PRG's delegation at what would become the world's longest negotiated peace deal, the 1973 Paris Peace Accords (1968-1973), he told Binh to carefully distinguish between imperialist governments and ordinary people, as the latter often had "a greater sense of justice"<sup>[27]</sup>.

Vietnam's wartime diplomacy was not merely marked by government-to-government diplomacy. There was also a separate front of "people-to-people" diplomacy, in which wartime Vietnamese diplomats would travel extensively across countries in Asia, Africa, Latin-America, and Europe to extend their solidarities with people and social movements-led struggles and explain the universality and commonalities of each other's own struggles for a more just decolonial world. Ordinary American and French people and their otherwise rich and admirable cultures were seldomly, if ever, a target of official wartime Vietnamese propaganda and denunciations. Instead, American and French intellectuals, students, politicians, military veterans, cultural icons, and the likes were fully embraced in a united campaign to have the US withdraw militarily from South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh once allegedly said: "The first front against US imperialism is in Vietnam. The second one is



right inside the US”<sup>[28]</sup>. In presently wartime Ukraine’s case, that would entail engaging more courageously with the Russian opposition (comprising of peoples and movements) to the war, irrespective of whether 90% or even merely 1% of the Russian people oppose the war.

With adequate awareness of many Ukrainians’ complicated and diverse historical consciousness to the Soviet and Russian imperial pasts, my recommendation may come across as painfully difficult, but it must be said: I sincerely do not recommend pushing away Russian friends of Ukraine as a strategy for rallying international support and solidarity. In the long run, Western support alone, from its governments and public, will be inadequate to Ukraine’s solution for its freedom and survival. Wartime diplomacy is as much about winning the hearts and minds of ordinary people around the world, as about lobbying precious material and military support from powerful, wealthy, and resourceful governments. If the latter was the only component, then Vietnam would’ve confined their wartime diplomacy to the USSR, the Eastern Bloc, and China, but they incomplacently did not. In retrospect, after 48 years since Vietnam’s reunification in 1975, its miraculous reconciliation with the West today has been partly forged by the genuine people-to-people solidarity with the various civil rights and solidarity movements across the Western world (the “1968” generation), particularly those in the US and France.



A frame from the Chris Marker’s film “Far From Vietnam”

But the dialectics of the transformative possibilities of anti-war activism and movements for decolonialism in contemporary times compared to the age of 1968 in terms of circumstantial differences must also be made clear. Without any doubt, Vietnam won the hearts of peoples across the Western world, especially in the US and France, partly from the latter societies’ assured basic civic liberties of freedom of assembly that allowed people of various social strata to express their

sense of justice in the streets and speaking truth to power. That freedom, rooted in one's moral and political convictions, is what made 10 ordinary and mostly young Americans willingly self-immolate themselves for the Vietnamese people<sup>[29]</sup>. Moreover, the 1968s were also a popular response to an imminent breakdown of the post-WWII social state building across both the capitalist Western and communist Eastern worlds. By contrast, moving almost half a decade forward, social movements across the world have been severely weakened by over 40 years of atomizing neoliberalism, and voices against the invasion of Ukraine are called out from its bottom-most ashes. Thousands of Russia's anti-war activists and protesters were arrested and brutally suppressed in the early days and weeks of the invasion of Ukraine. Such dangerously efficient state repressions, ranging from arbitrary arrests to pro-invasion propaganda in media and education, have ignited a chilling effect across Russian society in terms of encouraging a collectively self-imposed suppression of dissent and sympathy for the Ukrainian people among far too many millions of Russian people.

Unfortunately, Vietnam had the privilege of being militarily invaded on a large scale by both the US and China (1979-1989) in recent times. For many Vietnamese people, Russia's invasion of Ukraine also invoked painful memories and historical consciousness of the Chinese invasion in 1979. One reason why post-war reconciliation between Vietnam and China, at both the government and people-levels, have not been progressing with sincerity as much as with France and the US is that official government discourses and public opinion in China continue to view the invasion of Vietnam as righteous, with crimes committed in Vietnam still occasionally glorified in Chinese online media and patriotic education. There is one common trait shared by Russian and Chinese imperial chauvinism, and that is the lack of freedom for people to think and speak the truth to hegemonic discourses and power, which is an essential ingredient for any post-war reconciliations.



A frame from the Chris Marker's film "Far From Vietnam"

What ought to be comprehended from these comparisons is, in one hand, the significance of a democratic society with basic civic liberties achieved from almost two hundred years of social

struggles (including by 19th and early 20th century communists and socialists of diverse variants), and on the other hand, the capacity of authoritarian rule to corrupt and manipulate the moral conscience and integrity of ordinary people in the name of great power chauvinism. As a lesson from the 20th century, in the 21st century, any social revolution cannot move ahead without democracy. This lesson also applies to post-communist but still communist party-ruled Vietnam, as its once precious people-to-people diplomacy in solidarity with other international struggles has turned more statist and diluted in the age of triumphant (and ever-more authoritarian) global capitalism.

It can be said that Ukraine's daunting task of engaging with friends in Russia and in the global south is spectacularly more challenging than it ever was for Vietnam's wartime diplomacy. While the 1960s were an age of optimism across the formerly colonized world of the prospects of a more just world order, today's age is marked by profound global cynicism that a better tomorrow is possible. Nevertheless, Ukraine's most sustainable solution in the long term must also be that of Russia's own domestic solution to its draconian authoritarianism, which is why a civilizational and exclusionary approach to wartime diplomacy and domestic politics are doomed to be self-defeating and self-constraining. This is not a call for Ukraine to be able to solve all the world's contemporary problems on its shoulders while fighting an invading Russian army out of the country. It is rather a call of reflection about its self-identification when faced with an evident reluctance in many global south countries beyond the strategic interests of the latter's governments to maintain stable ties and economic cooperation with Russia.

## **The inherent but underappreciated relevance of Ukraine in the global south**

Many in the global south will find it hardly liberating to themselves (beyond the moral worth itself from supporting Ukraine's war of defence) when behind the major external rearguards of Ukraine are the very same unyielding creditors who often hold the majority ownership of their unsustainably high national debts. Recently, several countries in the global south (Egypt, Ghana, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Zambia to name a few) have already or are about to default<sup>[30]</sup>. This increasingly globally contagious macroeconomic situation is currently not only inviting debt restructurings on unfavorable terms but also further structural reforms within these countries, with the likelihood of deepening their existing social crises of rising extreme poverty, inequality, and stagnant development while still battling the multifold ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is this precarious context that the unwillingness and inability of the majority of countries in the global south to adopt economic sanctions against Russia must be understood by Ukraine's wartime diplomacy in the global south.





People stand in line for gasoline - to maintain order, the gas station was fenced off with a rope, Matara, Sri Lanka, July 2022. Photo: Evgeniya Zorina

In many ways, Ukraine is faced down with similar problems by an ongoing government-led neoliberalisation of its war economy to a scale without historical precedence for any country under an external military invasion<sup>[31]</sup>. The historical tragedy of the global south in the 20th century was that various economic, social, and political decolonization efforts in the end lost to either old prolonged or new forms of subjugations, which have by now consolidated into a plutocratic and capitalist world order. Today, many in the global south may ask whether Ukraine is willing to self-identify itself with such commonalities of problems and break that tide, or rather voluntarily join it and become a mirror of their own chained predicaments as opposed to a source of inspiration of an independent and progressive political agency in its wartime diplomacy and mainstream domestic politics and sociology.

It must be nevertheless asserted that Ukraine's war of defence against Russia carries inherent appeal among those who directly suffer from the claws of Russian neo-imperial military interventions across the world, from Syria to Myanmar. Broadly speaking, it is also a defence of the UN Charter in relation to smaller states across the world that are also embroiled in and victims of illegitimate territorial encroachments and threats of invasions by other great powers. Some great powers in the global south will in practice less emphasize and respect the territorial integrity, sovereign equality, and political independence of countries as stipulated in the UN Charter than other smaller global south countries. Hence their ostensible "neutralities" over Russia's war on Ukraine within the global south shouldn't be carelessly conflated together and naively imagined as a united front. With certainty, Vietnam's official neutrality is very different to that of China's neutrality, by to some extent being more sympathetic to Ukraine's situation due to the latter's comparative relevance and implications for the future of Asia's smaller states living under the threat of territorial encroachments and invasions.

To a greater extent than Indonesia, Vietnam today continues to defend its maritime territorial claims and exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea by the international laws against China's unilateral territorial claims and aggression<sup>[32]</sup>. If an otherwise faltering and weakened international legal order led by the UN system is forcefully replaced by imperial irredentism, it will amount to what a highly-ranked figure within the Vietnamese military establishment, former deputy minister of defense Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh, in the early weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine commented on the prospects of a Russian victory: "[it will spell] the death of international justice"<sup>[33]</sup>. Ahead of the Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow on March 20th 2023, president Vladimir Putin described the Russia-China relations as follows: "[The relations] surpass Cold War-time military-political alliances in their quality, with no one to constantly order and no one to constantly obey, without limitations or taboos"<sup>[34]</sup>. Without any doubt, today's Vietnam prefers the principles behind the current international legal order (while criticizing the inconsistent compliances in practice by the great powers), which it regards as the blueprint for realizing universal human values, over their possible replacement with lawless imperial irredentism now pushed most openly by Russia and China<sup>[35]</sup>. Ukraine may consider the latest peace proposal offered by China while standing firm on its national interests concerning territorial integrity and sovereignty and not carrying any illusions about it.



Chinese president Xi Jinping. Photo: Getty Images

In spite of abstaining on all UN General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine thus far, behind the scenes Vietnam understands that an Ukrainian capitulation will be disastrous to itself in the international legal front to defend its own territorial integrity and sovereignty<sup>[36]</sup>. On March 2nd 2022, the head of Vietnam's diplomatic mission to the UN held a speech to the UN General Assembly, notably remarking: "For a number of times, our nation's own history of enduring wars has shown that too often wars and conflicts until today stem from obsolete doctrines of power politics, the ambition of domination and the imposition and the use of force in settling international disputes. A number of them are associated with historical legacies, misperception and misunderstanding"<sup>[37]</sup>. This has been widely understood in domestic debates in Vietnam to be a veiled criticism of Russia's invasion of



Ukraine.

Moreover, ahead of the 1st anniversary of the invasion, two prominent Vietnamese military generals, Major General Nguyễn Hồng Quân and Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh, came out in a rare one hour-interview each to Vietnamese state media, harshly criticizing Russia's war<sup>[38]</sup>. Both asserted that Vietnam's vote of abstention at the UN General Assembly should not be understood as implying support for Russia's war. In fact, both said that Russia's stated legitimacy and justifications for attacking Ukraine could not be accepted by Vietnam, and that the international laws, justice (described as "righteousness" in the Confucian sense in the interviews), and the people's mobilization and will for victory is on Ukraine's side. The significance of these interviews is that they could not have been publicized without internal approvals by the decision-making circles within the Vietnam People's Army and the Vietnamese Communist Party<sup>[39]</sup>. However, Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh also pointed out that it was difficult for Vietnam to openly support Ukraine due to the latter's "pro-US ideology". This goes to show that, for many other countries in the global south, it may not only be about preserving realistically needed ties to Russia by itself, but also perhaps more fundamentally about Ukraine's self-identification and values in relation to them.



A frame from the Chris Marker's film "Far From Vietnam"

## Ukraine's changing wartime diplomacy in the global south?

The open-ended question is whether Ukraine will be able to realize their much greater and universal potential for the future of the world rather than merely becoming "part of Europe". Vietnam's wartime diplomacy and post-war political and economic developments offer as much as a lesson of success in rallying for international support and solidarity, as much as a lesson of avoidable human tragedies in retrospect when ethnicism, nationalism, and circumscribed political and civic freedoms take the front seat in response to the loss of an alternative world vision offered from a more



coherent and progressive “global south” as such.

Some of the limitations of Ukraine’s wartime diplomacy in the global south have objectively been structural, given how much it was Moscow that largely managed the diplomatic affairs of the USSR, and to which the contemporary Russian state is now fully exploiting in its diplomatic war offensive against Ukraine in the global south. But there are signs that Ukraine’s ministry of foreign affairs are increasingly becoming more attentive to the global south, particularly Africa<sup>[40]</sup>. Furthermore, in many ways Ukrainian democracy offers more visible hope and space for social struggle, change, and vitality within the country compared to Russia and even many countries in the global south today. Nevertheless, there are further scope for Ukraine to rectify and transcend its historical and contemporary pitfalls by its inherent universal relevance, if it is willing to move beyond a civilizational and exclusionary understanding of itself as well as the broader world, in particular the global south. This requires the critical attention and actions of Ukrainian citizens themselves to their own government’s diplomatic and political manoeuvres deemed counter-productive to the cause of Ukraine’s survival and future. This will be a difficult task if undertaken, given that the political infrastructure for progressive international solidarity and new economic thinking in the global south, once underpinned by the Bandung Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, and The New International Economic Order, is either no longer available in political and economic vitality or deemed resourceful for wartime Ukraine as they once were for Vietnam<sup>[41]</sup>. But it is nevertheless worth asking and reflecting on. What kind of a new Ukraine would we all like to see and build?

Allow me to end my constructive reflections with a quote by the late Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore: *“Where there is life it is sure to assert itself by choice of acceptance and refusal according to its constitutional necessity. The living organism does not allow itself to grow into its food: it changes its food into its body. And only thus can it grow strong and not by mere accumulation, or by giving up its personal identity. (...) That pride [of foreign acquisition] is itself a humiliation, ultimately leading to poverty and weakness”*<sup>[42]</sup>.

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*Commons* describes itself this way: The ‘Commons’ journal of social criticism is a left-wing Ukrainian media about economy, politics, history and culture, founded in 2009. What distinguishes us from other Ukrainian media is the attention to the structural causes of social problems and materialist optics. The editorial board shares egalitarian and anti-capitalist views. That is why in our publications we discuss how to change society so that there is no room for exploitation, inequality and discrimination.

## Footnotes

1. ^ *European Parliament News* (2023). “President Zelenskyy says Russia is a grave threat to the European way of life”.
2. ^ Sen, Amartya (2007). *“Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny”*. Penguin Books.
3. ^ The Ukrainian political scientist, Oxana Shevel, argues that post-1991 Ukraine went through “a progressive strengthening of the Ukrainian identity”, which from 2014 and onwards was accelerated to entail further “rapid Ukrainization & Westernization” of Ukraine. At the same time, post-1991 Russia went through “a progressive strengthening of imperial identity” and the construct of the civilizational-approached concept of “the Russian world”. In Shevel, Oxana (2023). *“Russia’s invasion, Ukraine’s resistance, and prospects for peace”*.
4. ^ While I will not elaborate the role and evolution of Ukraine’s domestic politics and sociology

in this occasion, what can be certainly asserted is that civilizational discourses, self-identification, and worldviews aren't unique to Ukraine, but in fact quite a proliferating and problematic phenomenon across the intellectual and political spaces in many post-communist countries today, including in Russia and China.

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6. ^ Biao, Xiang & Qi, Wu (2023). "Self as method: thinking through China and the world". Palgrave Macmillan.
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10. ^ Detik News (2022). "Ukraina minta dukungan RI: Anda bangsa bijak yang tepis rayuan komunis!" ["Ukraine requests Indonesia's support: You were wise to reject communist seduction!"].
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15. ^ The Jakarta Globe (2022). "Indonesia summons Ukrainian envoy over Russia tweet".
16. ^ The Palestine Chronicle (2022). "Ukraine declares support for Israel, condemns Palestinian terrorism".
17. ^ The Jakarta Globe (2022).
18. ^ Russia's allegations of US biological weapons programmes run in Ukraine were subsequently refuted by the International Atomic Energy Agency on March 18 2022 and the UN's Office for Disarmament Affairs on October 27th 2022.
19. ^ Phan, Xuan Dung (2022). "Agent Orange in Vietnam: Legality and US insensitivity". In The Diplomat.
20. ^ Ibid.
21. ^ Wilcox, Fred A. (2011). "Scorched earth: legacies of chemical warfare in Vietnam". Seven Stories Press.
22. ^ Ha, Hoang Thi & Dien, Nguyen An Luong (2022). "The Russia-Ukraine war: unpacking online pro-Russia narratives in Vietnam". In ISEAS Perspective. Dien, Nguyen An Luong (2022). "US will have to work hard to win over Vietnam's conservatives". In Nikkei Asia Review.
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25. ^ Buruma, Ian (2022). "Stop blaming the Russian soul". In Project Syndicate.
26. ^ Wu, Judy Tzu-Chun (2013). "Radicals on the road: internationalism, orientalism, and feminism during the Vietnam era". Cornell University Press; Nguyen, Thi Binh (2015). "A memoir: family, friends, and country". Tri Thuc Publishing House.
27. ^ Nguyen, Thi Binh (2015). "A memoir: family, friends, and country". Tri Thuc Publishing House.
28. ^ Documented in the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

29. ^ Nguyen (2015).
30. ^ *Financial Times* (2023). "Developing countries' debts mount as pandemic and strong dollar hit finances". Wolf, Martin (2023). "We must tackle the looming global debt crisis before it's too late". In *Financial Times*.
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34. ^ Kremlin (2023). "Vladimir Putin's Article for People's Daily Newspaper, Russia and China: A Future-Bound Partnership". Link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70743>.
35. ^ Do (2021); Dân Trí News (2022). "Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh: The Russia-Ukraine conflict has left many lessons". [In Vietnamese].
36. ^ The rather unlikely collapse of Russia as a federation, beyond the Kremlin regime under President Vladimir Putin, would also be viewed as disastrous in Vietnam, given that Russia remains the largest arms supplier to Vietnam.
37. ^ Báo Quốc Tế (2022). "Statement of Viet Nam at the UN General Assembly emergency session on the situation in Ukraine".
38. ^ FBNC Open Talks (2023). "The view of Major General Nguyễn Hồng Quân ahead of the Russia-Ukraine Spring War". [In Vietnamese]; VTC News (2023). "Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh on one year of war in Ukraine". [In Vietnamese. As of March 26th, the full interview has been pulled down].
39. ^ However, the continued support for Russia's war among segments within Vietnam's communist party and military establishments and broader public remains influential and is not to be underestimated. But as the war prolongs and Russia's faltering performance in Ukraine becomes objective truths, support for Ukraine has only increased.
40. ^ Interfax (2023). "Ukraine to train African diplomats". Mills, Greg (2023). "Why Ukraine needs an Africa strategy". In *RUSI Commentary*. Reuters (2022). "Ukraine to boost diplomacy in Africa, other regions".
41. ^ On December 14th 2022 Ukraine voted against the UN General Assembly resolution (document A/77/445) on "Towards a New International Economic Order" alongside 49 other UN member states.
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