

The impacts of the war in Europe on the Western Hemisphere with an emphasis on Latin America

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Latin America has always been a peripheral region in the international system. Systemic views of international politics have tended to prevail when studying the subject matter and the most important systemic perspective has been realism. When one follows the writings of old members of the Peruvian Foreign Service, for instance, they do have a realist perspective. But realism is a perspective that claims that conflict of interests among states are solved based on the distribution of power between them, and given that Peru is a middle income and peripheral country in the international system, the only realist thing to be is a liberal. That is why Peru makes multilateralism a guiding principle of its foreign policy, basically meaning that international law and international institutions must, up to a point, restrict discretionary use of power by stronger states. Thus, protecting the interests of states that cannot protect themselves through the exercise of hard power, and in coordination with states that are similarly placed in the international system. For instance, Foreign Minister José Antonio García Belaunde who served five consecutive years in that position, said the following in 2006 about Peru's foreign policy, "we are conscious of the importance of multilateralism as an appropriate space for middle and low income countries to participate on the international stage". More recently, Foreign Minister Gustavo Meza-Cuadra said something quite similar in 2020: "I want to emphasize the value of maintaining a foreign policy committed to multilateralism, international law and the principles of peaceful resolution of conflicts".

On the other hand, being a periphery within the international system usually means that Peru is at the receiving end of international trends. Being unable to shape them, we try to mitigate their effects. And even though we have a principled foreign policy based on multilateralism, at the same time, we do not always apply those principles to their fullest extent, since that may get us in conflict with more powerful states. For instance, Peru's foreign ministry does not make public statements on the human rights record of the People's Republic of China, based on the understanding that nothing we could say or do will make any difference to what happens in China, but it could have an effect on the behavior of the Chinese government towards Peru.

Take the example of Australia, a much bigger economy, a more powerful state, and a close ally of the US, when it criticized the way the Chinese government treats its population in Xinjian, applies a security law in Hong Kong, calls for an independent investigation on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, among others things. That did not make any difference on those issues, but did make Australia the target of significant economic sanctions by China. In that regard, when it comes to issues like Ukraine, countries like Peru tend to do the right thing, but within limits. We did deplore the invasion when it came to a vote in the General Assembly of the United Nations, but that was about it. The same could be argued about the rest of the region.

The same could be said about the left leaning government in Mexico; or the right wing government of Brazil: no country in the region tried to apply sanctions against Russia. In fact, several Latin American governments, arguing against criticism for not applying sanctions to Russia, that the region was already paying a heavy price because of an invasion we did condemn, in terms of slower growth and inflation (particularly regarding the price of gas, oil, food, and fertilizers). In Peru we have bought military hardware from both, Russia and Ukraine, and now cannot get spare parts, maintenance or overhaul from those countries given the circumstances.

In that vein, to a varying degree, all states in the international system do something similar in terms of a balancing act between principles and interest when they seem to be in conflict. For instance, NATO countries did not apply consistent sanctions against Russia's energy industry from the beginning of the war because of the cost that could inflict to their own economies. The case of Germany seems to be an example of this trend.

In relation to the possible consequences of the war in terms of international governance, I will focus on two issues that don't seem to be in the headlines but might become important down the road. The first issue is the political effects that the recession taking place in the European Union and the US, and the highest international rates of inflation in four decades, could have on political trends in the countries involved: they seem to be part of the explanation of the electoral performance of parties from the radical right of the political spectrum in countries such as Sweden, Italy and, to a lesser extent, the US. And in turn, the victories of radical right parties could have a negative impact on the way that some NATO countries deal with the war in Ukraine. For instance, Donald Trump has already said that the Democrats are sending over 40 billion dollars to Ukraine while American parents struggle to even feed their children. So, the argument won't be that they are siding with Putin, even though some of them are (we learned that, for instance, through the tapes of conversations between Silvio Berlusconi and congressmen from his party, Forza Italia). The argument is that they are putting the interests of their own country before the principle of helping Ukraine resist an invasion and annexation of its territory that violate international law. For instance, there was a march last October in the Czech Republic in which radicals from the right and from the left, joined forces, among other things, against supporting Ukraine. And the slogan raised by radical right groups during that march was quite indicative of who they take their cues from: "Czechia first".

On that regard, there are already forces that share this narrative provided by leaders like Donald Trump. Giorgia Meloni, for instance, has a very clear position regarding support for NATO efforts, vis a vis Ukraine and Russia. But her partners in government do not share her position, which is in fact far closer to Russia. For example, Matteo Salvini, whose party forms part of the ruling coalition in Italy. Thus, the biggest the share of the vote in favor of forces from the radical right, the more difficult it might be for NATO to support Ukraine against all odds.

The second issue that seems to be ignored on the headlines, is the long term effect of the precedent established by Russia in Ukraine for middle income and peripheral countries, like Peru. For example, the annexation of Crimea in 2014. There is an article by Mark Zacher in International Organization that reminds us from some basic facts. Between 1651 and 1950, 81% of wars between states did redistribute territory among them. Between 1951 and 2000 that happened only in 27% of interstate wars. And since 1946, there have been only 12 cases worldwide of territory redistributed through war. Thus, although international law does not always guide states' behavior, it does tend to generate a trend in which states progressively tend adapt to its mandates, as proved by this example.

Thus, before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, no state had annexed territory by force in the past 40 years. With that in mind, we must take into account that Peru has 50,000 square kilometers of economic exclusive zone in the Pacific Ocean, thanks to a ruling by the International Court of Justice. As mentioned at the beginning, we rely on multilateralism to protect our interest. Chile is much stronger in terms of military power than Peru. We could have never solved the issue at the bilateral level (since Chile officially argued that the maritime border had already been settled, thus, there was nothing to negotiate). Therefore, we took them to court and won. And Chile, to its credit, accepted the verdict and implemented it without delay. We know that they could have done something different, as Colombia did regarding the case in which Nicaragua obtained a favorable verdict from the same court. In that sense, what Putin did, if not stopped, could be the beginning of a trend in which those who can get away through force with what they want against international law, might try to do it more often in the future.