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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had a detrimental impact on multilateral nuclear diplomacy. The war caused an earthquake in procedure, paralyzing processes at the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations First Committee, and meetings dealing with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. This was the case even as Russia's nuclear saber-rattling and occupation of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, and Europe's recommitment to nuclear weapons, demonstrated the ongoing need for nuclear dialogue. States from the Global South tended to navigate cautiously vis-à-vis Russia across the multilateral nuclear negotiating forums. Amid greater difficulties in forging common positions on nuclear issues related to the Ukraine war, these states were also frustrated with what they perceived as a deprioritization of their interests in multilateral nuclear diplomacy. Western states, especially during the first year of the war, were seen as exercising unwelcome pressure on the Global South to take sides against Russia. Russia, meanwhile, pursued a dual strategy, undermining nonproliferation efforts and chipping away at trust in legacy institutions, while also leveraging these forums in pursuit of greater alignment with states in the Global South. The implications of these different dynamics for the health of the nuclear order may take some time to fully play out, but will likely be profound.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed for multilateralism. The war exacerbated polarization at the United Nations (UN) and hampered the organization's ability to play a decisive role in conflict resolution. International cooperation across UN agencies—even the most technocratic ones—was affected by growing acrimony between Russia and Western states. At the UN General Assembly, representatives of developing countries complained that Western states, excessively preoccupied with the Ukrainian crisis, ignored their problems. Although the UN Security Council managed to retain a level of basic functionality in 2022, the body appeared increasingly rudderless by 2023, as tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine—and, from October 2023, the war in Gaza—continued to bleed into other council business.¹ The war also fueled the fragmentation of global governance, with countries of the Global South seeking greater heft in multilateral diplomacy. Some of these countries increasingly turned to narrower groupings, such as BRICS, as alternative platforms and vehicles for collective action.²

¹ Richard Gowan, "The U.N. and Multilateralism Made It Through 2022 in Pretty Good Shape," International Crisis Group, December 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/un-and-multilateralism-made-it-through-2022-pretty-good-shape>; Richard Gowan, "How the World Lost Faith in the UN," *Foreign Affairs*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/how-world-lost-faith-united-nations-gaza>.

² Patrick Stewart and Emma Klein, "United Nations, Divided World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 28, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/09/28/united-nations-divided-world-pub-90659>. The BRICS group originally included Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and was further expanded in January 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Amid these divisions, which left both developed and developing countries disheartened with the state of multilateralism, Russia stepped up its engagement with the Global South.³ Russia's pivot in this direction had started long before its invasion of Ukraine, leveraging past Soviet activism in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. After February 2022, Russia considerably upped the ante, hoping to secure lifelines for the Russian economy and defense enterprise among partners in the Global South. Claiming that its war against Ukraine is at once defensive, preventive, and challenging America's purported claim to global hegemony, Russia also hoped to encourage these states to adopt a neutral posture vis-à-vis Russia at the United Nations and in other forums. In line with Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept, which gives heightened importance to relations with the non-West, Russian diplomats prioritized their engagement with Global South countries after February 2022.⁴ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's frequent visits to African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries in 2022 and 2023 represented only the most visible forms of that engagement, which capped a flurry of lower-level diplomatic activity.

These two dynamics—the general impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on multilateralism and Russia's intensified turn to the Global South—have been widely acknowledged. What has been less appreciated is how they have intersected in an area of multilateralism that was particularly shaken by the invasion: multilateral nuclear diplomacy.

The multilateral nuclear order—composed of a mosaic of organizations (such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA), treaties (such as the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT, and the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, or TPNW), informal practices, extended-deterrence guarantees, the legal governance of civilian atomic energy, and regional nuclear agreements⁵—was already under stress prior to the Ukraine invasion. It had to contend with the nefarious activities of individual proliferators (such as Iran and North Korea), the slow death of US-Russian arms control, and great-power competition, and it suffered a legitimacy crisis because of stalled progress toward nuclear disarmament.⁶ Russia's invasion of Ukraine exacerbated these woes: It increased the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs, caused strategic nuclear arms control to grind to a standstill, fueled fears about possible nuclear hedging tendencies in Asia and the Middle East, and reignited concerns over the safety and security of nuclear power plants in war zones. Diplomats forced to reckon with these myriad challenges at the IAEA, NPT, or UN First Committee had their work cut out for them.

This paper assesses the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on multilateral nuclear diplomacy, with a particular focus on dynamics between Russia and countries of the Global South. There is no commonly shared definition of what countries form part of the Global South, and usage of the term is controversial. Not all Global South states are non-nuclear-weapon states, not all of them adhere to the NPT, and there is considerable diversity in views

³ Hanna Notte, "Dangerous Decline: Russia's Military and Security Influence in the Global South and the Implications for the United States," CNS Occasional Paper No. 58, November 2023, https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RSI-Short-Report_Notte_2023_OP_CNS2.pdf.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

⁵ Alexander K. Bollfrass and Stephen Herzog, "The War in Ukraine and Global Nuclear Order," *Survival*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2022.2103255>.

⁶ Bollfrass and Herzog; Manuel Herrera, Tanvi Kulkarni, and Vicente Garrido, "Nuclear Non-Proliferation and the Global South: Understanding Divergences and Commonalities," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2023), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2023.2271385>.

within the Global South on both nuclear issues and on the war in Ukraine.⁷ The study adopts an expansive understanding of the Global South, to include not just economically less developed countries in accordance with historical definitions,⁸ but a broader set of non-nuclear-weapon states in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa.

Leveraging in-the-room observations from IAEA General Conferences and NPT (and, to a lesser extent, TPNW) meetings in 2022 and 2023, off-the-record conversations with approximately 20 diplomats from the Global South, and a systematic review of proceedings at the IAEA, NPT and UN First Committee, the paper shows how countries in the Global South have experienced the war's *procedural* and *substantive* impact in various nuclear forums, including on their interactions with Russia and Western states.

A few cautionary remarks on methodology are warranted: Some of the findings presented likely have multicausal explanations and cannot be attributed solely to Russia's war against Ukraine. Factors such as anti-Americanism, a growing self-confidence in the Global South, or China's influence cannot be easily measured from the official record, nor did they feature prominently in the interviews conducted. Still, such alternative explanations for the findings presented cannot be discarded. It should also be noted that some of the diplomats interviewed have served their respective countries in multilateral forums for decades, while others have only had modest experience in multilateral nuclear diplomacy. This discrepancy may well have affected reflections, shared by individual interviewees, on the impact of the war on their field of work.

An Earthquake in Procedure

Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused an earthquake in procedure across multilateral nuclear forums, much to the chagrin of the Global South. At the IAEA, heightened acrimony between Russia and Western states affected engagement on issues as mundane as meeting agendas, while also bogging down both sides in excessive rights of reply. A tendency by Western diplomats to leave the room when Russian counterparts spoke, to exclude Russian officials from events, or to seek to strip them of positions,⁹ left many states from the Global South feeling "caught in the middle," "uncomfortable," and "frustrated."¹⁰ Some interviewees argued that the war had dealt a final blow to the already precarious "Vienna spirit" of cooperation and compromise that had long allowed technical agencies such as the IAEA to

⁷ India and Pakistan were never parties to the NPT; the same is true of Israel and South Sudan. North Korea withdrew in 2003. Herrera, Kulkarni and Garrido, "Nuclear Non-Proliferation and the Global South"; Richard Gowan, "The Global South and the Ukraine War at the UN," International Crisis Group, March 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global-ukraine/global-south-and-ukraine-war-un>.

⁸ For a discussion of the historical use of the term "Global South" and its definitions, see Patrick Stewart and Alexandra Huggins, "The Term 'Global South' Is Surging. It Should Be Retired," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 14, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/08/15/term-global-south-is-surging.-it-should-be-retired-pub-90376>.

⁹ For instance, ahead of the June 2022 IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Poland's permanent representative had instructions from Warsaw to initiate action to expel Russia from the board. Other European states persuaded Poland not to follow through on this effort, which appeared unrealistic given the way seats on the Board of Governors are allocated (per Article VI.A.1 of the IAEA's Statute).

¹⁰ Interviews with diplomats from several countries in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, September 25-29, 2023. All of the interviews for this research were conducted on the condition that the names of the diplomats and the countries which they represent would not be published.

carry out their work in relative insulation from political disagreements. There is evidence, however, that the “Vienna spirit” was damaged long ago, if indeed it ever existed.¹¹

Frustration over the procedural haggling and hiccups caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war extended beyond Vienna to include proceedings involving the NPT review process and at the UN First Committee. At the NPT Preparatory Committee meeting in the summer of 2023, the New Agenda Coalition (NAC)¹²—which includes Global South heavyweights Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, and South Africa, among other non-nuclear-weapon states—bemoaned an excessive politicization of multilateral disarmament forums.¹³ Amid an atmosphere in which every single process and meeting was colored by the war, diplomats interviewed lamented Western criticism over their countries’ “neutrality” and a perceived pressure to “take sides” vis-à-vis Russia in nuclear forums. One diplomat from an African country summarized the prevailing feeling among small, developing states, using a common proverb: “When the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.”

The post-invasion procedural earthquake was evident not only in rights of reply,¹⁴ bickering over administrative issues, or a feeling among Global South diplomats that they were expected to criticize Russia. The IAEA General Conference and UN First Committee also saw an increased tendency toward voting on resolutions that used to be passed by consensus in years past.¹⁵ At the 2022 IAEA General Conference, Russia and Western states faced off over the resolution on nuclear security, which ended up being voted on. Aggrieved over efforts by Western states to introduce language related to Ukraine and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) into the resolution, Russia presented several amendments.¹⁶ It did so even after the debate had been closed, before proceeding (backed by China and Iran) to propose to divide the resolution for voting by paragraphs. The United States, in response, accused Russia of “procedural shenanigans.”¹⁷ The increased resort to voting at the IAEA alarmed diplomats from the Global South for two reasons: First, they warned of dangerous precedents being set, which could cause more countries to feel emboldened in the future to push for voting. Second, and related, they feared that the adoption of resolutions by voting—rather than by consensus—would weaken the IAEA’s mandate.

¹¹ For an examination of the history of the “Vienna spirit” at the IAEA, see Elisabeth Roehrlich, *Inspectors for Peace: A History of the International Atomic Energy Agency* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

¹² “New Agenda Coalition,” Nuclear Threat Initiative, updated/last reviewed July 1, 2022, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/new-agenda-coalition/>.

¹³ Statement on behalf of the New Agenda Coalition, First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), General Debate, Vienna, July 31, 2023, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom23/statements/31July_NAC.pdf.

¹⁴ At the UN General Assembly, during the general debate, statements in exercise of the right of reply to any other speaker are made at the end of each day. A delegation, or a group of delegations, may also demonstrate their disagreement with a speaker by getting up simultaneously and leaving the General Assembly Hall during a speech.

¹⁵ At IAEA General Conferences, periods of intense voting have existed before, on issues such as the “Israeli Nuclear Capabilities” resolution—a resolution long sponsored by the group of Arab states that calls on Israel to join the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state and put all its nuclear sites under comprehensive IAEA safeguards.

¹⁶ The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant came under occupation by the Russian armed forces on March 4, 2022 and has remained under Russian control since.

¹⁷ IAEA General Conference, Plenary, Record of the Eleventh Meeting, Vienna, September 30, 2022, GC(66)/OR.11, December 2022, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc66or11_prl.pdf.

Voting also increased at the annual sessions of the UN First Committee, with a growing number of texts requiring paragraph-by-paragraph voting. This dynamic was partially a function of more resolutions being introduced on the same issue—with Russia introducing texts to compete with Western-backed resolutions and sometimes even creating parallel processes—and partially the result of states exploiting rules of procedures (for example, insisting on introducing amendments on the floor) more liberally. Russian diplomats in particular were leveraging their knowledge of the UN rulebook to introduce amendments, create precedents, insist on consensus to block processes, and create distractions. One diplomat interviewed mused that the Russians “must be sleeping with the rules of procedure under their pillow.” The 2023 Gaza War, in motion by the time the 2023 UN First Committee meeting commenced in New York, further complicated dynamics and poisoned the atmosphere.

At the NPT, the growing readiness among states to use rules of procedure to block or complicate the diplomatic process has become apparent in other ways. At the NPT’s Preparatory Committee meeting in 2023, for instance, Iran blocked the chair even from submitting the “draft factual summary” as a working paper under his own authority, a practice that had become common over the past two decades. This was an unprecedented move, which Russia and China—at a minimum—were not prepared to challenge.¹⁸ This led some interviewees to suggest that, in the post-Ukraine-invasion period, states appear more willing to “stand alone on an issue” in multilateral nuclear forums, compared to a few years ago (while China’s growing assertiveness in nuclear forums clearly predated the Ukraine invasion).¹⁹

As states from the Global South tried to navigate such dynamics, they remained averse to “naming and shaming” Russia over the invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Such reluctance to call out specific states over their actions is, to some extent, rooted in past practice among many states of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which emerged in the context of the wave of decolonization that followed World War II.²⁰ While Western states, after February 2022, wasted no opportunity to call out Russia in various nuclear forums over its invasion, its nuclear saber rattling, or its occupation of Ukrainian NPPs, states from the Global South—with some exceptions²¹—avoided joining in the chorus, justifying their caution with an aversion to “naming and shaming.” Their diplomats further justified their attitude by pointing to the importance of “minimizing polarization” and the need to prioritize “issues” and

¹⁸ Observers of the Preparatory Committee differ in their views on whether Russia approved of or encouraged Iran in going that far. For one account, see William C. Potter, “Behind the Scenes: How Not to Negotiate an Enhanced NPT Review Process,” *Arms Control Today*, October 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-10/features/behind-scenes-not-negotiate-enhanced-npt-review-process>.

¹⁹ The author’s interlocutors differed in their explanations of Iran’s heightened obstructionism, however. While some thought Iran might feel more emboldened given its growing ties with Russia in the wake of the Ukraine invasion, most pointed to the importance of individual Iranian diplomats for Iran’s modus operandi at any given multilateral meeting.

²⁰ At the NPT Preparatory Committee in 2019, for example, while many states in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) criticized the practice of extended deterrence, none specifically called out the United States as a party to blame. Instead, these states issued general statements calling on *all* parties to implement their legal obligations under the NPT.

²¹ Such outliers have included, for instance, Ghana, which, unlike other states in the Global South, specifically referenced the difficult safety and security situation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP (at the 2022 IAEA General Conference); Guatemala, which criticized the “illegal, unjustified, and unprovoked invasion of sovereign territory of Ukraine on the part of Russia” (at the 2022 UN First Committee); and Ecuador, which condemned Russia’s announcement of its plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus (at the UN Security Council on March 31, 2023).

“actions” *in principle* (such as nuclear sharing or nuclear rhetoric) over the specific “actors” responsible, given the need to achieve “universal adherence” to norms.²² Some also accused Western states of applying double standards in calling out some “bad” actors, but not others—referencing US President Donald Trump’s irresponsible nuclear rhetoric²³ or Israel’s bombing of nuclear reactors in Iraq and Syria as actions that Western states previously failed to condemn. More fundamentally, some rejected what they perceived as a Western attempt to frame multilateral diplomacy as an exercise reserved for “good” countries, for a “club of the holy,” where those considered “bad” actors—in the current instance, Russia—should be marginalized.²⁴ Expectations by Western states, especially in the first months of the Ukraine invasion, that capitals in the Global South should “fall in line” in support of pressuring Moscow also caused considerable consternation.

The procedural problems and pressures that developing states saw themselves confronted with also left their mark on intra-Global South dynamics and alliance politics. Many states of the Global South belong to different groupings and institutions, some of which are specific to nuclear diplomacy (such as the NAC and the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean, or OPANAL), while others operate in the broader multilateral environment (such as the G77 or the NAM). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to growing tensions in some of these groupings, given difficulties among member states in forging a common position on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Diplomats reported “heated discussions” and “haggling” over statements, which took longer to negotiate and often were reduced to the “lowest common denominator.”²⁵

During the Ukraine war’s second year, some of the immediate procedural repercussions of the invasion subsided. This was most obvious at the IAEA’s 2023 General Conference, at which a coalition of predominantly Western states supported a new resolution on “nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine,”²⁶ with a view to avoiding the polarization that had afflicted discussions of the technical resolutions at the 2022 conference. Several countries from the Global South either remained absent from or abstained in the vote on the resolution—a fact that encouraged Russia to claim a diplomatic win²⁷—citing their concerns that some elements of the resolution had exceeded the agency’s mandate.²⁸ Still, diplomats from the Global South commended the constructive engagement by the co-sponsors prior to the vote (“a willingness to listen and change language”) and applauded the resolution as a “key success” in that it allowed the agency’s technical resolutions to become “depoliticized”

²² Interviews with diplomats from two countries in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 3, 2023.

²³ On August 8, 2017, US President Donald Trump threatened “fire and fury” against North Korea if it endangered the United States.

²⁴ Interview with a diplomat of a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of a diplomatic conference near Vienna, May 27, 2023.

²⁵ Interviews with diplomats from countries in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 3 and 4, 2023.

²⁶ “Nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine,” Resolution adopted on 28 September 2023 during the tenth plenary meeting, IAEA General Conference, GC (67)/RES/16, September 2023, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67-res16.pdf>.

²⁷ See Statement by the Russian Federation on Item 25, “Nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine,” during the plenary debate, 67th IAEA General Conference, September 28, 2023, <https://streaming.iaea.org/24331>.

²⁸ See statements by Brazil and South Africa on Item 25, “Nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine,” during the plenary debate, 67th IAEA General Conference, September 28, 2023, <https://streaming.iaea.org/24331>.

again.²⁹ Overall, these diplomats also approvingly observed that debates had come “a little less emotional and more focused,” that “not all the oxygen was taken up by the Ukraine issue,” and that European states had “learned and listened, in terms of their engagement with the Global South.”³⁰

“Too Little Attention to Our Priorities”

From the viewpoint of countries in the Global South, the procedural concerns discussed above were amplified by frustrations over substance. According to these countries, discussions at the IAEA became excessively focused on Ukraine-related issues. This was, according to diplomats, especially the case during the first year of Russia’s war. In general, there was a feeling, particularly at the United Nations in New York, that crises and conflicts in other regions had never gotten the same attention in multilateral forums as Ukraine did, which fueled a perception of Western double standards. In nuclear forums specifically, while several priorities of countries from the Global South were perceived to have been relegated to secondary priority, one agenda item was noted in particular: nuclear disarmament.³¹

The Russo-Ukrainian war exacerbated a pre-existing concern in the Global South over what these countries have long viewed as insufficient progress toward nuclear disarmament. The invasion, which enhanced the salience of nuclear weapons and caused Europe to recommit to such weapons and to expand NATO, added fuel to the long-standing debate over nuclear deterrence versus disarmament. For advocates of abolishing nuclear weapons, multiple aspects of how the conflict unfolded reinforced the urgency of accelerating progress to eliminate nuclear weapons. For proponents of deterrence, meanwhile, Russia’s conventional war waged under an umbrella of nuclear coercion validated their conviction that, in a world in which *all* states have given up their nuclear weapons, *one* cheating state may come to pose a serious threat to others.³² States in the Global South have pushed back against the “deterrence-first” camp, rejecting the notion—supported by Western states after February 2022—that there are “responsible” and “irresponsible” nuclear-weapon states.³³

Frustration among states in the Global South regarding the slow progress toward nuclear disarmament and, relatedly, what they have perceived as an imbalanced implementation of the NPT’s three pillars (of nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy) echoed a long-standing complaint of the non-nuclear-weapon states. But their dissatisfaction manifested itself more vehemently after the invasion of Ukraine, as became apparent in national statements issued by countries at the 2022 NPT Review Conference, the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, and the 2022 UN First Committee. Importantly,

²⁹ Interviews with two diplomats from countries in the Global South, conducted after the conclusion of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, September 29 and October 2, 2023.

³⁰ Interviews with two diplomats from countries in the Global South, conducted after the conclusion of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, September 29 and October 2, 2023.

³¹ Other issues mentioned were the peaceful use of nuclear energy, the Iranian safeguards issue, the Convention on Nuclear Safety, and a lack of new initiatives by the IAEA Board of Governors because of its preoccupation with Ukraine.

³² For a full treatment of the deterrence versus disarmament debate, see: Lewis Dunn, “The Disarmament, Arms Control, And Non-Proliferation Implications of the Invasion of Ukraine,” UNIDIR, 2022.

³³ See, for instance, debates at the 2022 UN First Committee, where the United States, the United Kingdom, and France (the so-called P3) sought to juxtapose their “responsible” nuclear policies with those of Russia. See also Rebecca Davis Gibbons, Stephen Herzog, Wilfred Wan, and Doreen Horschig, *The Altered Nuclear Order in the Wake of the Russia-Ukraine War*, American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2023.

such statements failed to differentiate between Russia and Western nuclear-weapon states in assigning responsibility for the slow progress toward disarmament—much in line with the aforementioned aversion to “name and shame.” Rather, states rejected the notion of conditionality—that is, that the international-security environment needs to improve for progress toward nuclear disarmament to be viable—invoked by both Russia and Western states. Speaking at the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, the NAC remarked pointedly that the NPT, with its disarmament obligations, “does not include provisions for or require the perfect international security environment to be implemented.”³⁴

Such frustration ensured that support from among the Global South for the TPNW, which had entered into force in January 2021, would remain solid after February 2022.³⁵ The debate at the 2023 UN First Committee meeting, for instance, was indicative of such support, with signatories introducing stronger language on the treaty into some of the resolutions being negotiated.³⁶ Several interviewed diplomats confirmed their countries’ growing focus on the TPNW, though without attributing it directly to the impact of the Ukraine war. Some expressed a growing desire to work on parallel tracks—pursuing progress on disarmament through the TPNW, while still remaining active in the NPT—though a subset of those also warned that it was past time that the NPT “got into crisis mode” if it wanted to avoid a growing disinterest from non-nuclear-weapon states.³⁷

Amid a renewed focus on the need for nuclear risk reduction in the wake of Russia’s invasion, countries from the Global South generally tolerated such measures. They consistently emphasized, however, that risk reduction could be only an interim measure, as opposed to a substitute for efforts toward disarmament. Statements to that effect were made at the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting by the Philippines and Brazil, the latter arguing that risk-reduction measures should in no way be construed as compliance with the NPT’s Article VI. South Africa went furthest in its critique, arguing that “the risk reduction efforts being proposed ... are contradictory and of no value or contribution towards nuclear disarmament.”³⁸

Amid frustration over a deprioritization of their routine concerns in multilateral nuclear forums, countries of the Global South also had to contend with new agenda items arising in

³⁴ Statement on behalf of the New Agenda Coalition, First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Vienna, July 31, 2023, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom23/statements/31July_NAC.pdf.

³⁵ In the first half of 2022, it appeared conceivable that the war in Ukraine might become a point of disagreement among TPNW signatories, as Marion Messmer warned. Marion Messmer, “The impact of Russia’s war against Ukraine on multilateral nuclear diplomacy,” European Leadership Network, June 22, 2022, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-impact-of-russias-war-against-ukraine-on-multilateral-nuclear-diplomacy/>. To date, it appears that this has not happened, with the exception of South Africa resisting language that would have called out Russia more specifically for nuclear threats at TPNW Meetings of States Parties.

³⁶ Reaching Critical Will, *First Committee Monitor*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (October 21, 2023), <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/FCM23/FCM-2023-No4.pdf>. On the robustness of the TPNW since the invasion of Ukraine, see also Gibbons et. al., *The Altered Nuclear Order*.

³⁷ Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted after the conclusion of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, October 2, 2023.

³⁸ “South African National Statement for Cluster I – Nuclear Disarmament,” First Preparatory Committee of the 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Vienna, August 3, 2023, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom23/statements/3Aug_South_Africa.pdf.

response to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Those included, among others, the security and safety of Ukraine's NPPs (in particular the Zaporizhzhia NPP), Russia's issuance of nuclear threats, and the enhanced salience of nuclear sharing (including in light of Russia's announcement in spring 2023 that it would station nuclear weapons in Belarus). Generally, and as indicated above, there was a tendency in the Global South to argue that issues related to the war in Ukraine should either be discussed at the United Nations³⁹ or be tackled *in principle*, as opposed to in relation to a specific actor (Russia). One Latin American diplomat, for instance, conceded that it was important to address the situation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP but held that the NPT review conference "had not been the place to do it."⁴⁰ Another source contended that the Global South supported engagement with the nuclear dangers arising from Russia's actions in Ukraine "at a higher level of abstraction"—that is, without direct reference to Russia.⁴¹

The renewed focus on nuclear sharing, which Russia's announcement of its intent to deploy nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus elicited in March 2023, illustrates this point.⁴² Following the announcement, states from the Global South—many of which have long been critical of NATO's practice of nuclear sharing—issued general statements to the effect that "nuclear sharing among NPT States Parties constitutes a clear violation" of the treaty, and called on states to cease such practices.⁴³ Debating Russia's announcement at the UN Security Council on March 31, 2023, Brazil noted its long-standing opposition to any nuclear-sharing arrangements, before remarking that "two wrongs do not make a right."⁴⁴ Other Global South states, including Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique, were yet less inclined to criticize Russia.⁴⁵ A caution vis-à-vis Russia, coupled with a rejection of the idea that there are "legal" versus "illegal" forms of nuclear sharing, was also evident in interventions from the Global South during the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee and UN First Committee meetings. At the TPNW's Second Meeting of States Parties in November 2023, the issue ended up complicating negotiations over consensus language: South Africa refused to permit any (even indirect) reference pointing to Russia's recent deratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, seemingly in response to other states trying to soften language referencing extended nuclear deterrence and nuclear alliances.⁴⁶

³⁹ See, for instance, national statements delivered during the 2023 IAEA General Conference, in which several countries from the Global South offered explanations as to why they had abstained in the vote on the "Ukraine resolution" ("Nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine").

⁴⁰ Interview with a diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 2, 2023.

⁴¹ Interview with a diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 1, 2023.

⁴² William Alberque, "Nuclear Weapons in Belarus: History Repeats Itself," *Russia Matters*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/nuclear-weapons-belarus-history-repeats-itself>.

⁴³ Statement on behalf of the African Group by Ambassador Philbert Abaka Johnson, Permanent Representative of Ghana, Cluster II, Third Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Vienna, August 4, 2023, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom23/statements/4Aug_AfricanGroup.pdf.

⁴⁴ UN Security Council, "Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use Higher Than at Any Time Since Cold War, Disarmament Affairs Chief Warns Security Council," SC/15250, March 31, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15250.doc.htm>.

⁴⁵ UN Security Council, "Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use Higher." A notable exception was Ecuador, which explicitly condemned Russia's announcement.

⁴⁶ Written correspondence with a participant in the TPNW's Second Meeting of States Parties, New York, November 27 – December 1, 2023.

Russia's Dual Strategy

The war's highly visible procedural impact on nuclear forums has tended to mask subtler but no less important efforts by Russia to fragment the existing nuclear order and reduce the West's influence over it. Facing an intense backlash from Western states over its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been pursuing a dual strategy: it has undermined nonproliferation efforts and chipped away at trust in legacy institutions, while also leveraging these forums in pursuit of greater alignment with non-Western states.

Over the past two years, Russia has clearly deprioritized nuclear nonproliferation.⁴⁷ Its delegations to NPT meetings in 2022 and 2023, for instance, were led by diplomats of relatively low rank, which suggests that Moscow accorded less significance to the NPT review process than in the past.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Russia placed the blame for the paralysis in multilateral nuclear forums squarely on Western states, in what was an intensification of similar accusations in the past.⁴⁹ For example, it accused these states of “politicizing” the IAEA in their attempts to insert Ukraine-related language in technical resolutions or at the Board of Governors. In its interventions, Russia urged that the IAEA be saved from the “sad fate” that befell the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)—a disarmament body that has been incapacitated by Russian-Western acrimony for years.⁵⁰ Russia's accusations were part and parcel of a broader attack—one that long predates the Ukraine invasion but intensified after February 2022—on what Moscow derisively calls a dysfunctional “rules-based international order,” Russia's reference to a perceived Western substitution for international law.⁵¹

Russia also combined its charges of politicization with attempts to undermine trust among countries in the Global South in the impartiality and professionalism of the IAEA's technical work. This practice echoed Russia's years-long attack on the OPCW's Technical Secretariat. Amid the war against Ukraine, according to one source, Russia made a habit of asking rhetorical questions about the IAEA's work—as opposed to attacking it directly—which may well have had an effect on those states from the Global South that maintain small representations in Vienna.⁵² Speaking during the debate on the chair's “draft factual summary” at the end of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Russia also cast doubt on the impartiality of the Finnish chair, insinuating that he was under “serious political pressure,” which allegedly prevented him from presenting a more “balanced” summary.⁵³

⁴⁷ Hanna Notte, “Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Iran Nuclear Price Tag,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, February 2023, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20083.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Potter, “Behind the Scenes.”

⁴⁹ For instance, Russia repeatedly accused the United States and Western countries more generally of politicizing the Iran dossier, on occasions when the IAEA published new reports.

⁵⁰ Hanna Notte, “The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons: a tale of cooperation and its unravelling,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 1-3, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10736700.2020.1766226>.

⁵¹ Hanna Notte, “Chemical Weapons Impasse Reflects Russia's Broader Conflict with the West,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 16, 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/86015>. Among Western countries, the term “rules-based international order” has positive connotations and is viewed as something to be supported and maintained.

⁵² Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 3, 2023.

⁵³ Russian statement on the last day of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 11, 2023, “Consideration of Draft Report.”

The post-invasion period also saw a greater degree of Russian alignment with China and Iran in multilateral nuclear forums. As a matter of official positioning, Russia had already sided with China in scrutinizing the AUKUS partnership—which Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States had announced in September 2021—prior to the Ukraine invasion.⁵⁴ After February 2022, there was a perception that Russia upped its objections to AUKUS, which it would have had anyway, and was quicker to jump to China’s side.

Finally, Russia engaged in subtle efforts to charm countries of the Global South in multilateral nuclear forums, while refraining from exercising direct pressure on them. There was little evidence in the interviews that Russia had attempted to strong-arm countries to support its positions.⁵⁵ At most, as one diplomat admitted, the Russian Foreign Ministry might have sent *notes verbales* ahead of important votes, encouraging states to be “unbiased.” Moreover, Russia never “named and shamed” the states in the Global South that voted against it. Instead, it focused its critique on the Western backers of relevant resolutions as part of its effort to underscore the narrative that such resolutions were “Western initiatives.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, a small subset of diplomats representing countries well-versed in nuclear matters offered an altogether different explanation for the perceived absence of Russian (or, for that matter, Western) pressure on them: they argued that their governments have always held “consistent positions on these issues,” and “everyone knows that,” implying that pressure campaigns targeted at them would have been to no avail.

Russia did, however, step up its outreach to coalitions in the Global South after February 2022, including to intensify engagement on multilateral nuclear issues. According to several diplomats, Russia reached out to “middle ground” states at the IAEA and within groupings such as the G77, the Arab Group, and the NAM, in what several sources termed a quest for allies. Russia requested observer status at the G77, a position the country had already been granted with the NAM prior to the invasion of Ukraine. The Global South, however, was cautious in responding to Russian overtures; formal observer status at the G77, for instance, was “considered a step too far for most states.”⁵⁷ At the NAM Consultative Group in New York, meanwhile, Russia’s observer status afforded it greater opportunities to promote its positions. However, Moscow’s expressed interest in attending NAM meetings related to the NPT was frustrated when the NAM adopted a new rule that restricted attendance to non-nuclear-weapon states party to the NPT. While Russia’s efforts “have not had a meaningful impact on states’ established positions yet,” its leveraging of the NAM as a platform “could

⁵⁴ White House, “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>. At the 2021 UN First Committee, Russia said, “It is already clear that this partnership will not contribute to strengthening the NPT. There is a potential risk that another non-nuclear-weapon State will be used to deploy nuclear-weapon States’ military nuclear infrastructure. This leads to greater international instability and runs counter to the efforts to reduce nuclear weapon arsenals.” Reaching Critical Will, *First Committee Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (October 9, 2021), <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/FCM21/FCM-2021-No2.pdf>.

⁵⁵ It is conceivable 1) that political pressure to that effect would be exercised at the highest level of government, and/or 2) that interviewees might not be forthcoming about instances of any such pressure. The absence of evidence of Russian pressure on countries of the Global South should therefore not be construed as proof that such pressure was not exercised.

⁵⁶ Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted after the conclusion of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, October 2, 2023.

⁵⁷ Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted after the conclusion of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Vienna, October 2, 2023.

over time have an impact on states that have less firm positions,” according to one source.⁵⁸ Russia also intensified its engagement with regional organizations like OPANAL.

Various states in the Global South have also been mindful of their political and economic interests with Russia in navigating the multilateral nuclear forums. One diplomat from an Asian country noted that states in the Global South rely on Russia economically, and Russia has been historically strong at the IAEA, providing expertise to the Technical Secretariat; “states are not willing to jeopardize that,” the diplomat said.⁵⁹ Such acknowledgments, however, were rare, and most interviewees couched their positions across forums in terms of principle, rather than as a function of extraneous concerns vis-à-vis Russia. To quantify the impact of these political and economic interests is therefore a tall order. Russia, for its part, has sought to continue to capitalize on its appeal to the Global South in the civilian nuclear sector, speaking at length at the 2023 IAEA General Conference about its plans for nuclear cooperation with Africa—which was also a priority topic at the Second Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in July 2023.⁶⁰ At the IAEA’s recent International Symposium on Floating Nuclear Power Plants (FNPPs) in Vienna, Rosatom representatives elaborated on their interest in selling FNPPs to the Global South.⁶¹ Finally, economic ties with China may have also influenced the positions of some countries of the Global South in multilateral nuclear forums. Since China’s position on the Ukraine war has been “moderate,” many states in Africa and Latin America—benefiting from Chinese trade and technical cooperation—have felt “compelled to take the same position.”⁶²

The Future of Multilateral Nuclear Diplomacy

As Alexander K. Bollfrass and Stephen Herzog have noted, the nuclear order has never been coherent or harmonious, perfect or fair, or even been considered existentially healthy.⁶³ Concerns over the dismal state of the NPT, or charges of politicization at the IAEA, have a long history. However, the geopolitical tensions caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, reverberating across the multilateral landscape, exacerbated pre-existing grievances held by countries in the Global South in nuclear forums. Overall, the war had a significant impact on multilateral nuclear diplomacy: it paralyzed processes across existing forums and created opportunities for Russia to further fragment the nuclear order. Russia’s invasion did not produce distinctly new problems so much as worsen existing ones, though Russia’s occupation of civilian nuclear facilities and nuclear saber-rattling do represent an unprecedented challenge to nuclear norms. The war also greatly intensified Russia’s

⁵⁸ Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 3, 2023.

⁵⁹ Interview with diplomat from a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Vienna, August 3, 2023.

⁶⁰ Statement by the Russian Federation in the General Debate at the 67th IAEA General Conference (in Russian), Vienna, September 25, 2023, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/23/09/russian-federation_gc67_ru.pdf. The Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023 featured a session dedicated to “Nuclear Technologies for the Development of African Region”; see <https://summitafrica.ru/en/programme/business-programme/>.

⁶¹ Rosatom announced in June 2023 that it will establish a joint venture with Russia’s TSS Group to construct FNPPs for overseas markets (the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa); see <https://www.bennettjones.com/Blogs-Section/Canada-Endorses-Nuclear-Industrys-Powerful-Statement-On-Net-Zero>.

⁶² Interview with diplomat of a country in the Global South, conducted on the sidelines of a diplomatic conference near Vienna, May 27, 2023.

⁶³ Bollfrass and Herzog, “The War in Ukraine and Global Nuclear Order.”

diplomatic reorientation toward the Global South, with additional implications for the nuclear order.

These general findings mask considerable nuances, as grievances were not uniformly shared across all regions. For instance, it appeared in the interviews that diplomats from Latin America bemoaned, in particular, the deprioritization of nuclear disarmament as a result of the war in Ukraine, while diplomats from Africa criticized a reduced political focus on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Furthermore, in each region of the Global South, some states have adopted outlier positions—not just at the United Nations, but also in nuclear forums—in the sense that they have leaned more toward Western states and openly criticized Russian actions.⁶⁴

Dynamics have also differed across forums. Two years into the war, it appears that the IAEA has proven relatively resilient, with an improvement in atmospherics at the 2023 General Conference, compared to 2022. Interviewees attributed this to the fact that access to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy remains a uniting issue and that there is a sense of belonging with the IAEA, given member states' strong interest in its functioning. By comparison, the impact of the war on the NPT was assessed as more severe, in that it amplified a crisis that has existed for years. Finally, at the United Nations, the war has fueled a fragmentation of processes in the disarmament sphere, much in line with a general turn toward what some have termed “multi-multilateralism”: an à la carte approach to collective action, where states from the Global South increasingly pivot between different platforms.⁶⁵

Western states are not blameless for the state of multilateral nuclear diplomacy. One of the most important reasons why Russia has held its own with countries of the Global South in these forums has had less to do with its own efforts and more to do with these countries' increased agency and assertiveness in light of their discontent with the West's perceived dominance. Set on forging the broadest possible alliance against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, Western states alienated many parties in the Global South. It took time for them to realize that if they wished for multilateral institutions to continue functioning, they needed to ensure that their disagreements with Russia did not result in procedural paralysis or dominate their agendas with partners from the Global South.

Russia, meanwhile, appears to have lost interest in the health of the nuclear order, except in select areas such as nuclear energy. It is using relevant forums not to foster cooperation, but to chip away at trust in legacy institutions, all while drawing the Global South into its orbit. As Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin recently wrote, today's Russia considers the existing, Western-led international order to be beyond repair.⁶⁶ Instead, Moscow is looking to construct building blocks for new international regimes, together with the non-Western “World Majority” – this year it is organizing more than 250 engagements as chair of an expanded BRICS, for example. It seems reasonable to expect that Russia will continue to use activities such as these to fragment the existing nuclear order and marshal support for its own positions on nuclear issues.

⁶⁴ The list of such states includes Ecuador, Ghana, and Guatemala, among others.

⁶⁵ Patrick Stewart and Emma Klein, “United Nations, Divided World.”

⁶⁶ Dmitry Trenin, “Russia Is Undergoing a New, Invisible Revolution,” *RT*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.rt.com/russia/595266-ukraine-west-pushed-russia/>.

Note

A shorter Commentary on some of the findings presented in this CNS Occasional Paper will be published in the June–July 2024 issue of *Survival* (vol. 66, no. 3).

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