

War in Ukraine widens global divide in public attitudes toward US, China and Russia: Report

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Around the world, public attitudes toward international politics are coalescing into two opposing blocks: liberal democracies favoring the United States (US) and citizens of more authoritarian nations who back China and Russia—a process accelerated by the war in Ukraine.

This is according to University of Cambridge researchers, who "harmonized" data from surveys conducted in 137 countries, including in 75 countries since Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, and found a divide—growing for a decade—that now polarizes the global population.

They say that Russia's war has led people in the West to feel ever greater allegiance to both the US and NATO, and brought wealthier democracies in Latin America and Eastern Europe towards a pro-American stance.

However the report also identifies a zone of illiberal and undemocratic societies, stretching from East Asia through the Middle East and out towards West Africa, characterized by the exact opposite trend: populations that have steadily increased support for China, Russia, or both, in recent years.

Among the 1.2 billion people who inhabit the world's [liberal democracies](#), three-quarters (75%) now hold a negative view of China, and 87% a negative view of Russia, according to the report, published today by the University's Center for the Future of Democracy (CFD).

Yet among the 6.3 billion who live in the world's remaining 136 countries, the opposite is the case—with 70% of people feeling positively towards China and 66% towards Russia.

The analysis includes significant public opinion data from emerging economies and the Global South, and suggests this divide is not just economic or strategic but based in personal and political ideology.

"The world has divided into liberal and illiberal spheres," said report co-author Dr. Xavier Romero-Vidal, from Cambridge's Bennett Institute for Public Policy. "Today's global divide does not depend as much on historic ties between nations. The strongest indicators we found for how societies across the world align geopolitically are their fundamental values, such as freedom of expression."

Maritime vs Eurasian Bloc

On one side of the new divide are what researchers call the "maritime alliance," with principles based in free flows of trade and ideas, and the protection of individual rights.

These countries include much of Europe and more stable parts of the Americas and Australasia. Their lodestar is still primarily the US, despite the disturbance of the Trump presidency.

The opposing cluster is centered on a "Eurasian Bloc" anchored by China and Russia, with links across the continent to Central Asia, Iran and the Arab Middle East, as well as large parts of Africa and Southeast Asia.

Researchers say that some comparisons to the Cold War era still hold, as this latter group is broadly united in a rejection of "western modernity" and liberal values.

"High-income democracies have become steadily more secular and receptive to minority rights, but the rest of the world has not," said co-author Dr. Roberto Foa, co-director of the CFD at Cambridge's Bennett Institute.

"Autocrats such as Putin have taken the opportunity to present themselves as defenders of what they call 'traditional' values against a perceived threat of western liberalism."

The war on Ukraine has "galvanized" this divide, but the findings suggest it has been a decade in the making, as global public opinion on geopolitics was far more mixed and undefined ten years ago.

The researchers argue that China's assertiveness and transnational infrastructure investments have helped shift the dial, as well as both China and Russia's strategic focus on Africa.

"Russia's war has caused this global divide to intensify, as literal battle lines are now drawn that reflect the two sides of liberal freedoms and authoritarianism," said Foa.

"If we look at how different populations around the world feel towards Russia, we find an almost identical reflection of how their governments have handled the country diplomatically."

China, Russia and the US—global attitude data

The report finds that Russia has been losing its "fringe" support among extremists in the West for a decade. The proportion of western citizens with a positive view of Russia had already fallen from two in five (39%) to less than a quarter (23%) by the eve of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and now stands at just one in eight (12%).

Meanwhile, public positivity toward Russia has plummeted in formerly sympathetic European countries such as Greece (69% to 30%), Hungary (45% to 25%) or Italy (38% to 14%).

In developing country regions, however, Russia is still viewed favorably. This includes 75% of respondents in South Asia, 68% in Francophone Africa, and 62% in Southeast Asia.

In fact, despite the 2022 invasion, public opinion of Russia remains positive in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, as well as both India and Vietnam.

Similarly, attitudes to China now split the West from the rest. Just five years ago, two in five (42%) western citizens held a positive view of China, a figure that has almost halved (23%).

However, after a COVID-related dip, China's popularity in the developing world has rebounded, especially among the 4.6 billion people in 147 countries participating in the colossal "Belt and Road Initiative"—among whom almost two-thirds hold a positive view of China, compared to just a quarter (27%) in non-participating countries.

The one major exception appears to be Latin America, where—in contrast to other developing country regions—respondents now favor the United States over China by a record 24% point lead.

Dissatisfaction with democracy

Much of the new fault line is rooted in attitudes towards [democracy](#). "Democratic societies are far more negative towards Russia and China, whereas the reverse is true for more authoritarian societies. This association did not exist a decade ago, yet is quite clear today," said Romero-Vidal.

However, a number of electoral democracies are highly positive about Russia and China. These are nations struggling with corruption and democratic legitimacy, such as Indonesia, India and Nigeria.

In fact, dissatisfaction with democracy is a majority view in 69% of the countries in which most people feel favorably toward Russia. Moreover, out of all nations in which dissatisfaction with democracy is a majority view, three-quarters (73%) also have publics who are positive about China.

"Perceived democratic shortcomings are associated with greater public receptivity towards Russia and China. Democracy and free expression are messy, as even the most established democracies have demonstrated in recent years," added Foa.

"China offers a model of authoritarian modernisation in which personal liberties are forsaken for the promise of economic growth and national prestige. The relative appeal of China versus the United States may not simply be a question of America's attractiveness as an ally, but as a political model."

More information: A World Divided: Russia, China and the West, [www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk ... ons/a-world-divided/](https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/news/a-world-divided/)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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