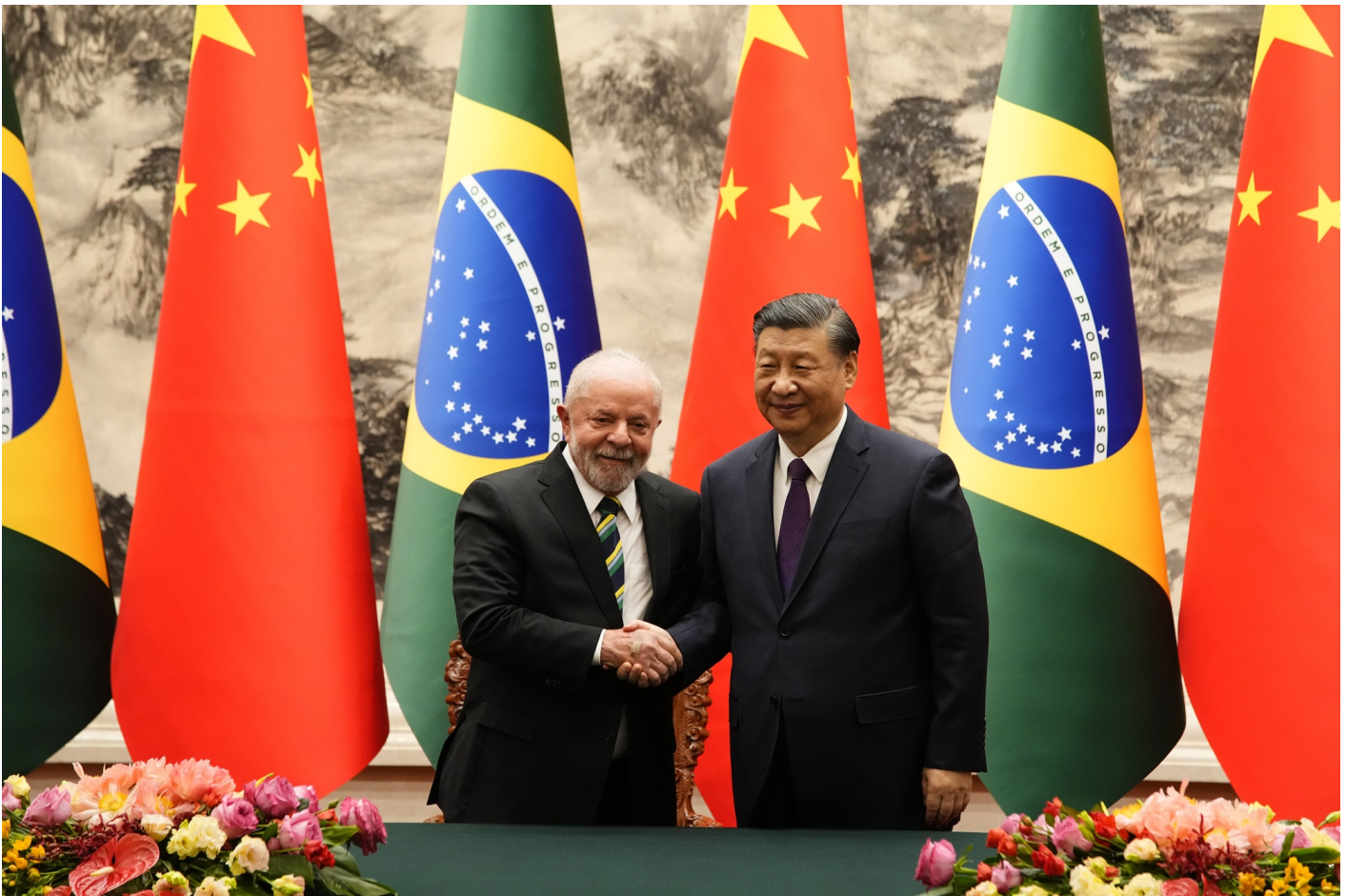


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# The Global South Owes America Some Thanks

The rules-based order crafted after World War II has been favorable — transformative, even — for the developing world.



New friends. *Photographer: Ken Ishii/Getty Images*

By [Hal Brands](#)

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Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, suggested as much at the New Development Bank in Shanghai this month, when he paired calls for peace in Ukraine with calls for an end of American hegemony. He isn't the only one who feels this way.

If many countries in the "Global South" seem ambivalent about supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, it's because they're ambivalent about the larger world order that Russian aggression imperils. The liberal international order, this critique holds, is shot through with Western hypocrisy and aimed at oppressing the developing world.

Yes, it's true that this order involves injustice and double standards. But on balance, it has served the Global South's interests fairly well — and far better, certainly, than whatever might come after American hegemony.

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You wouldn't have guessed that from Lula's recent commentary. Lula has consistently blamed both Russia and the West for the war in Ukraine; he has long condemned the inequities of an American-led world. While in China, he again suggested Ukraine should make concessions for peace; he also declared Brazil and China must cooperate to "balance world geopolitics" and dethrone the dollar.

For Lula — and not just for Lula — neutrality over Ukraine and disillusionment with the prevailing order are two sides of the same coin.

The US may have rallied the advanced democracies to defend Ukraine, but many developing countries have remained diffident. They grumble that the West doesn't care about their humanitarian crises, and that it practices the same military interventionism for which it now condemns Putin. They argue, more fundamentally, that the developing countries are being asked to defend an order that mostly serves to keep the West on top.

This critique resonates because it contains elements of truth. All international orders reflect the interests of their creators; this order was set up to structure a world favorable to Washington after World War II. The powerful sometimes play fast and loose with rules they purport to uphold, which is why American criticism of Putin often meets the retort, “What about Iraq?”

It is surely galling, moreover, that a system supposedly based on universal values is still characterized by glaring disparities in the wealth and well-being of nations. And one can understand why a US-led system looks dubious to developing countries that were on the receiving end of American interventions in the Cold War and after.

Yet this bill of particulars doesn't tell the whole story. The liberal order has been favorable — transformative, even — for the developing world.

For one thing, it helped create the developing world. It is no coincidence that a tidal wave of decolonization occurred after World War II, as a European-dominated system gave way to one led by an (imperfectly) anti-imperial superpower.

For reasons of ideology and self-interest, the US pushed its European allies to decamp from colonial possessions from Indonesia to Algeria. It fostered norms of self-determination and human rights that made imperialism harder to justify. Not least, by protecting Europe's declining powers with its alliances, Washington gave them the security they needed to relinquish empires they had seized as sources of power and prosperity in a cut-throat world.

America's record was hardly spotless: It also supported a bloody French war in Indochina. But on balance, the liberal order made the world safer for decolonization.

It also made a world in which developing countries could, well, develop. The relatively open international economy of the last eight decades owes to the dominance of the US Navy, which secures the seas, the American dollar, which lubricates global commerce, and the network of institutions and trade agreements through which Washington has fostered freer trade.

That system turbocharged the rise of China, South Korea, Singapore, Chile, and other countries; it has lifted living standards around the world. Sure, the current

system is unequal. But it has created more broadly shared prosperity than any international order in history.

Finally, the global south has benefitted enormously from the delegitimization of conquest. Prior to 1945, once-independent nations were regularly wiped off the map. Since 1945, lesser forms of aggression have persisted, and independent countries have sometimes been occupied for periods of time by external powers, but only one country — South Vietnam — has simply vanished due to conquest.

This remarkable achievement is the product of a liberal order that features strong principles of self-determination, backed by a superpower that has devoted itself to thwarting territorial aggrandizement. Weak countries everywhere would be worse off if conquest remained the norm.

Why, then, does the liberal order have a sullied reputation? The answer involves two mistakes people everywhere — not just the global south — make in thinking about the modern world.

First is failing to ask, “Compared to what?” Every world order has shortcomings. But is the liberal order worse than a world run by European empires? Is it worse than one dominated by China, which makes outrageous territorial claims at the expense of its neighbors, or by Russia, which is engaged in aggression and atrocity on a horrifying scale? The inequities of our world are undeniable. The inequities of others might be far worse.

Second, critiques of the present order illustrate how much we take for granted. Decolonization, growing global prosperity, and the delegitimization of conquest didn't just happen: They were products of an order built and maintained by the US. If that system goes, so might its benefits. Lula and similarly minded leaders don't like aspects of the current order. One suspects they'd like the world much less after that order is gone.

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