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Many Issues Stew Beneath Yoga and UNity

By Diane Chido
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Hundreds practice yoga on the United Nation's lawn during Mod's trip to America.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi entered the *Guinness Book of World Records* on June 21, 2023^[1] by leading a record-breaking 135 nationalities in a yoga session just outside the United Nations headquarters in New York City. Perhaps Modi wanted to show his flexibility on U.S. policy requests (ba dum tss!).

This is a charming way to introduce a head of state on an official visit to the U.S. but why did he do it at the U.N., rather than the National Mall, for instance? The mass event was held to mark the International Day of Yoga, a global observance

that Modi was instrumental in establishing through the U.N. in 2014. In brief remarks on the occasion, Modi explained to the assembled crowd, “You are gathered here as the United Nations at the meeting point of entire humanity ... yoga means ‘to unite.’”[2]

The creation of the United Nations in 1945 was part of the larger outcome of the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, bringing the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the European powers into a complex set of agreements creating the U.N., as well as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. This effort was undertaken with the aim of preventing future large-scale European wars by tying the major economies together and establishing a forum for collegial discussion on issues that might provoke mass violence. We all learned in school that it was essentially the successor to the failed League of Nations.

Although Soviet leader Joseph Stalin sent delegates to the earlier conferences creating this new system, he worried that its mainly Western components would leave him with little power in the new body. He claimed that on grounds that the Philippines was a de facto U.S. colony and received a vote while all 15 of the Soviet Union’s socialist republics were denied votes. The U.S. countered that each of its 48 states should then have a vote. They compromised by giving the Byelorussian and Ukrainian Socialist Republics votes in addition to the Soviet Union’s. Thus, Russia had three votes and this outcome now bolsters Ukraine’s claim of being a separate nation long under Russian domination. Putin counters that it is only a part of Russia.

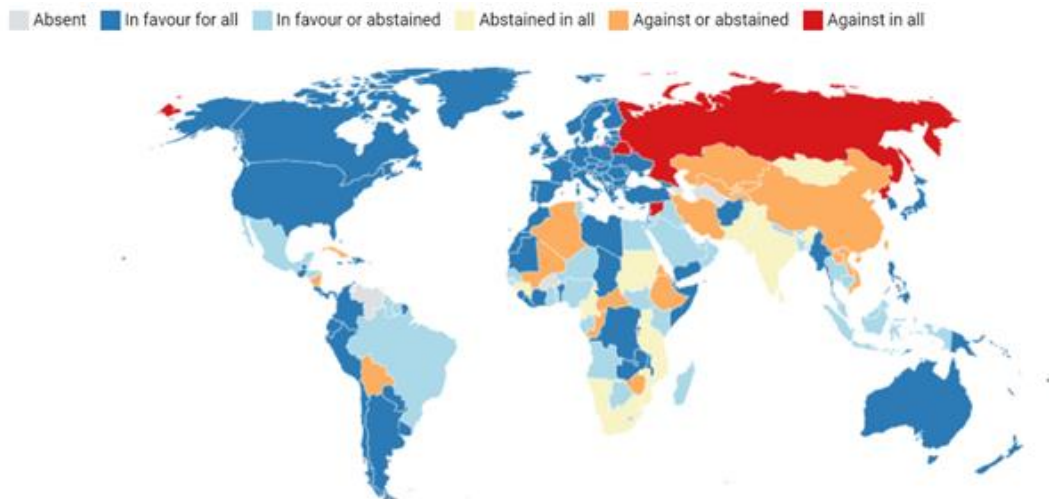
As the European powers gradually recovered from the ravages of World War II, their colonies began to seek independence and they let them go due to exhaustion and lack of resources to continue dominating them. Today, the U.N. has 193 member nations in its General Assembly, in which each country has one vote. The Security Council is the leadership body and five countries are permanent members, called the P5: the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, and the Russian Federation. Ten additional members are elected for terms of two years. It is quite easy to see how difficult it can be for the U.N. to come to an agreement about anything with such diverse leadership.

All of this results in its decisions being called “resolutions,” and not laws. The U.N. is thus more of a consultative body. Despite the existence of international laws that are meant to govern everyone, it can decide on things, but cannot really enforce them effectively with no standing army to coerce compliance from its members. This brings to mind newly independent America under the Articles of Confederation, which quickly became untenable and gave way to the structures and institutions of the Constitution. But it is unlikely that U.N. members would give up sovereignty to live under a shared constitution.

The U.N. also ends up making policies that cater to the lowest common denominator of agreement and the issuance of sometimes pithy statements and condemnations with no teeth. The International Criminal Court in the Hague, Netherlands, for instance, is part of the U.N. system. The U.S., which strongly supported the ICC's creation to prosecute the world's "worst of the worst," has never joined it over concerns that its own citizens could be prosecuted for actions taken during times of war. This is a cause for much international eye-rolling given that the U.S. supports international law but does not always abide by it.

One globally divisive issue today is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To watch only our own media, you might think the whole world is united in condemning Russia and supporting Ukraine's fight for existence. However, you would be incorrect in this assumption. On March 2, 2022, immediately following the invasion, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution in a rare emergency session that demanded "the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all its armed forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders." [3]

In agreement were 141 countries, with five countries voting against (Belarus, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and Eritrea) and a full 35 abstaining from the vote. [4] The map indicates countries today supporting this and subsequent resolutions in blue, always opposing in red, and some abstentions and one-time opponents in yellow and orange. Note that India has remained neutral and abstained in all votes relating to the war. [5] Thus, we see one reason why the Biden administration is rolling out the red carpet for the Indian prime minister.



Where every country stands on the Russia-Ukraine war

While the war is essentially being waged by two countries, Putin claims perhaps correctly that he is not fighting just Ukraine, but fighting NATO. We have also heard the news reports about Iranian drones and Russia's requests for military support from China. Despite the reticence of so many to become involved, the war really does have consequences for the whole world.

As much as Russia is a critical oil and gas supplier to the globe, Ukraine is its breadbasket. While Europe scrambles to wean itself from addiction to Russian energy by closing pipelines, increasing purchases elsewhere, and ramping up alternative energy supplies, millions of people are facing food insecurity in Africa due to a lack of Ukrainian grain. We are approaching harvest time for the second year in a row and there will be little available now for at least another year, even if the war stopped today. This crisis was exacerbated by the flooding resulting from the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, likely at the hands of Russia, earlier this month.

Another aspect of the war in terms of its international character is the potential global realignment that it portends. The NATO alliance is strong, as President Biden has consistently stated and worked hard to re-establish U.S. ties with allies that were frayed by former President Donald Trump's frequent criticisms. President Biden is a globalist with a strong belief in the Bretton Woods-established international system of laws and norms. The West has enjoyed the security and stability of this system over the past 70 years, when it was established to prevent large-scale European war and was strengthened by its opposition to Russia's Eastern European sphere of influence.

However, this system does not work for everyone. Just as white supremacy was not a beneficial system for American and the world's non-white populations under colonialism, the "international system" is intended to promote democracy and capitalism and tips the scales soundly in favor of western nations. China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and many African countries, such as authoritarian Eritrea, do not see how they benefit from this alignment. For them, a new global structure appears more attractive.

During the Cold War, India remained famously "nonaligned," seeking trade and other arrangements with both sides. It seems to be trying to do the same now as a rising non-European power in its own right (again, remember the red carpet and deferential vegetarian state dinner on offer this week). Often, diplomacy goes on behind the scenes, but sometimes it is on display to be interpreted by those who know the history and complexity of the relationships. It is not unlike a good soap opera that engages viewers with a constantly shifting web of interrelationships, long-held grudges, and unrequited longings.

In June 2022, at its 10-year summit, NATO included language about the threat of China to the international order for the first time in its history. The relevant part of the Summit declaration reads, “We face systemic competition from those, including the People’s Republic of China, who challenge our interests, security, and values and seek to undermine the rules-based international order.”^[6] This is a clear line of demarcation of who is “in” and who is “out” in this European-designed system.

Keeping in mind that this is NATO, not the U.N., of which China is an integral member, it still marks a shift in the alliance system built to “make the world safe for democracy.” Just this week, President Biden was vilified by the Peoples Republic of China press for referring to self-declared Chinese President for Life Xi Jinping as a dictator.^[7] Although China calls itself a communist country, it does not want to be seen as “that undemocratic.”

For the time being, the democratic lunch table is where the cool kids sit and everyone else wants a seat at that table. Ensuring this remains the case is the U.N.’s job, despite its yoga-shared aim at unity. Predicting how long this will last before some other system supplants it is beyond the powers of any living foreign affairs analyst, even centenarian Henry Kissinger.

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