

## Power politics and the fear factor: Trump redefines the international order

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### Theme

The drastic shift in US foreign policy under the second Trump presidency –from promoting and guaranteeing a rules-based international order to acting unilaterally and on the basis of power– has fractured a historic transatlantic consensus and forced emerging countries to realign their strategic positions for fear of US retaliation, unimaginable under the previous order.

### Summary

A few weeks before 'Liberation Day' on 3 April, when the Trump Administration announced the [application of reciprocal tariffs](#) against allies and adversaries, the liberal international rules-based order of which the US was the architect, promoter and guarantor since the end of World War II, officially [came to an end](#).

It was 22 February 2025, the day the last resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine promoted by the EU and Ukraine was voted in the United Nations General Assembly. A sort of fall of the Berlin Wall, in this case much more than an actual wall, but of a complex work of institutional architecture that resulted in 80 years of relative peace and formidable progress as never before experienced by humanity.

In that vote the US not only broke with a long tradition of unequivocally supporting UN resolutions condemning flagrant violations of international law and sovereignty (including, incidentally, Russian aggression in Ukraine), but also broke with the established practice of aligning with its transatlantic alliance partners in a united front to universally condemn violations such as forcible annexation and territorial aggression. The US voted against the resolution condemning the Russian invasion aligning itself with the vote of Russia, Belarus, North Korea, Nicaragua and the usual suspects, joined by Hungary, which broke unanimity in the EU bloc.

The countries of the EU, the rest of the developed countries and those of Emerging Europe, maintained their unequivocal support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia, with very few exceptions.

Not so the emerging countries that defected in their support for Ukraine. The 'fear factor' was at work. Under the previous rules-based international order, not aligning with the US in foreign policy did not entail the risk of economic or other reprisals, which allowed

emerging countries to hold principled positions and/or act in accordance with their interests. However, in the new order governed by power politics, the ‘fear factor’ – particularly visible in Latin America, which had overwhelmingly supported previous resolutions condemning Russia– has turned dissent into a decision fraught with strategic risks, prompting these countries to abandon principled positions in favour of a survival instinct.

## Analysis

A few weeks before ‘Liberation Day’ on 3 April, when the Trump Administration announced the application of reciprocal tariffs against allies and adversaries, the liberal international rules-based order of which the US has been the architect, promoter and guarantor since the end of World War II, officially came to an end.

It was on 22 February 2025, the day the last resolution so far condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine promoted by the EU and Ukraine was voted in the United Nations General Assembly. A sort of fall of the Berlin Wall, in this case much more than an actual wall, but of a complex work of institutional architecture that resulted in 80 years of relative peace and formidable progress as never before experienced by humanity.<sup>1</sup>

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Who stood up to the US and remained aligned with Ukraine, who abandoned it and why?

### 1. Ukrainian votes at the UN pre-Trump: 2022-24

From the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and until [Donald J. Trump took office for the second time](#) as President of the US on 20 January 2025, 10 resolutions condemning Russia were voted in the UN General Assembly. These resolutions can be classified into three types:

- Resolutions condemning aggression and violation of territorial integrity (four resolutions). The UN General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine regarding Russian aggression and Ukraine’s territorial integrity are those condemning the Russian invasion, military occupation and attempts at illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories through invalid referendums and demanding immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces, respect for international law –including humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1960 the world’s per capita income has trebled and in the last 50 years 1.8 billion people have been lifted out of poverty.

law and the Geneva Conventions— and humanitarian access to protect the civilian population.

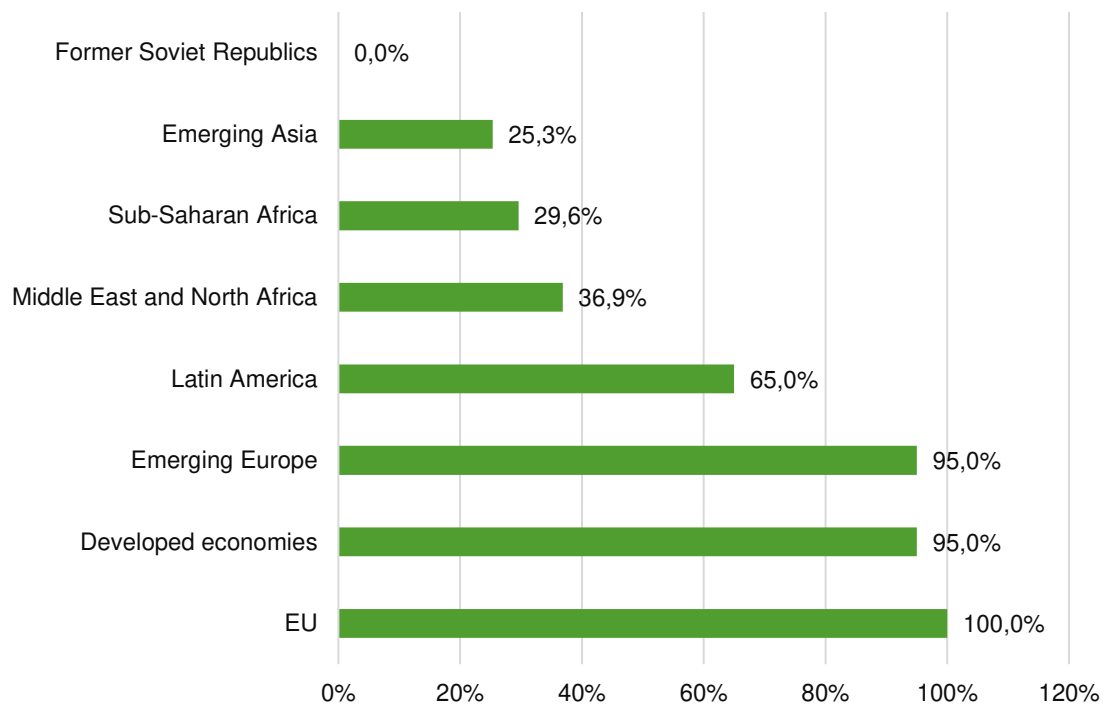
- Resolutions condemning human rights violations (three resolutions). The UN General Assembly resolutions on the human rights situation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine –including Crimea and Sevastopol– reaffirm Ukraine's sovereignty, condemn Russia's occupation and aggression, and denounce systematic human rights violations, such as arbitrary arrests, forced conscription, repression of fundamental freedoms and discrimination against ethnic minorities, in particular Crimean Tatars. They also call for unrestricted access by international human-rights bodies. These resolutions have been voted on since 2016, two years after the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation.
- Other resolutions condemning Russia (three resolutions). Those categorised as other condemnation resolutions include various aspects. The resolution on reparations (2022) holds Russia accountable for violations of international law and calls for the creation of an international reparations' mechanism and a damage registry. The resolution on suspension of Russia's membership rights in the Human Rights Council (2022) responds to gross and systematic violations of human rights in Ukraine. Finally, the resolution on the safety of Ukrainian nuclear facilities (2024) condemns the Russian military occupation of the Zaporizhzhia power plant, warns of the risk of nuclear accidents and demands its return to Ukrainian control, endorsing compliance with international nuclear safety standards.

These are the patterns that emerge from the analysis of the voting on pre-Trump resolutions (Figure 1):

- The US voted in favour of all 10 resolutions condemning Russia (as did Ukraine) while Russia voted against (China voted together with Russia on six of the 10 resolutions and abstained on the other four).
- 100% of the EU countries, the rest of the developed countries and the countries of Emerging Europe (all candidates for accession to the EU) voted in favour of all 10 resolutions (only Singapore among the rest of the developed countries and Serbia among the Emerging Europe countries abstained on four resolutions).
- In the emerging regions, the percentages condemning Russia dropped significantly: 65% of the countries of Latin America, 37% of those of the Middle East and North Africa, 30% of those of Sub-Saharan Africa, 25% of those of emerging Asia and 0% of the former Soviet republics, voted on average in favour of the 10 resolutions condemning the Russian invasion.

Only in Latin America did a clear majority of the countries of the region support the resolutions condemning Russia, and this majority increases to 75% if we exclude Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, which in none of the 10 resolutions condemned the invasion. In the rest of the emerging regions, support for resolutions condemning Russia was clearly below 50%.

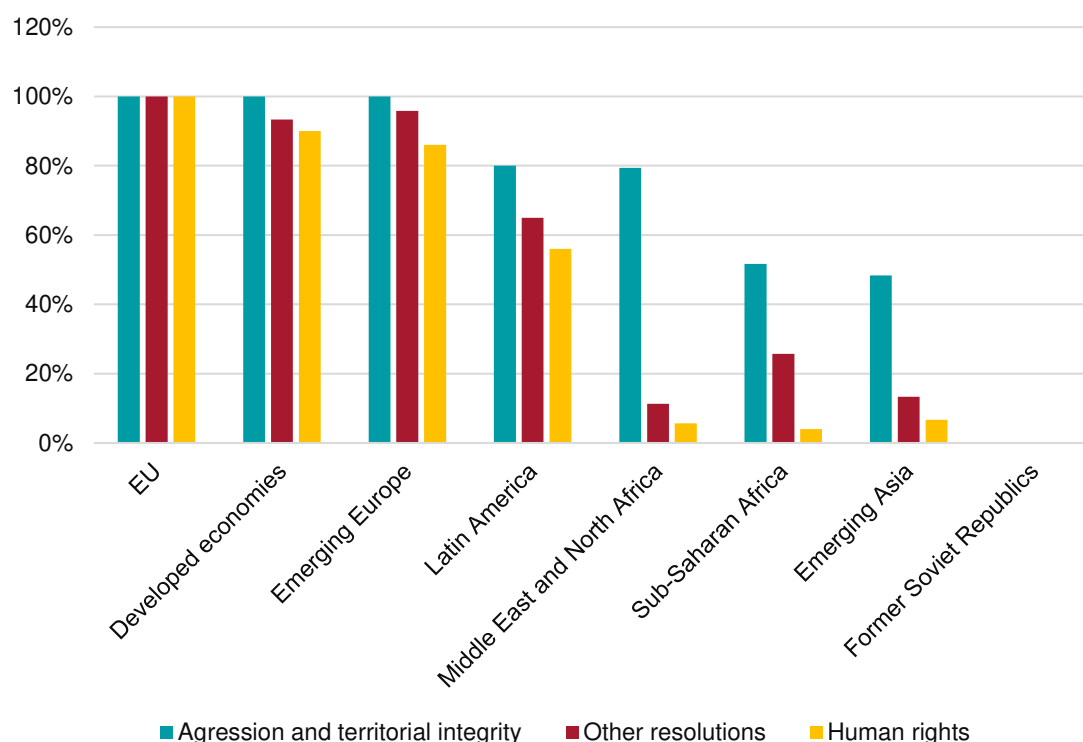
**Figure 1. Support for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly: 10 resolutions condemning Russia, 2022-24 (% of countries in each bloc)**



Source: the authors based on UN data.

- The vote is not homogeneous among the different types of resolutions. With the exception of the EU, where 100% of the countries voted in favour of each type of resolution, in the rest there is a higher percentage of support for resolutions condemning aggression and the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity than for resolutions condemning human rights violations and other types of resolutions (Figure 2).
- In all country blocs except for the former Soviet republics, the highest level of support is for resolutions condemning aggression and violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity (Figure 2).
- Resolutions condemning the violation of human rights and other types of condemnatory resolutions only attract the majority support of the EU, the rest of the developed countries, the countries of Emerging Europe and, among the emerging countries, only of Latin America. In the rest of the emerging regions, support for these two types of condemnation resolutions is frankly low (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Support for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly (by type of resolution, % of countries in each bloc)**



Source: the authors based on UN data.

## 2. The post-Trump UN vote: 22 February 2025

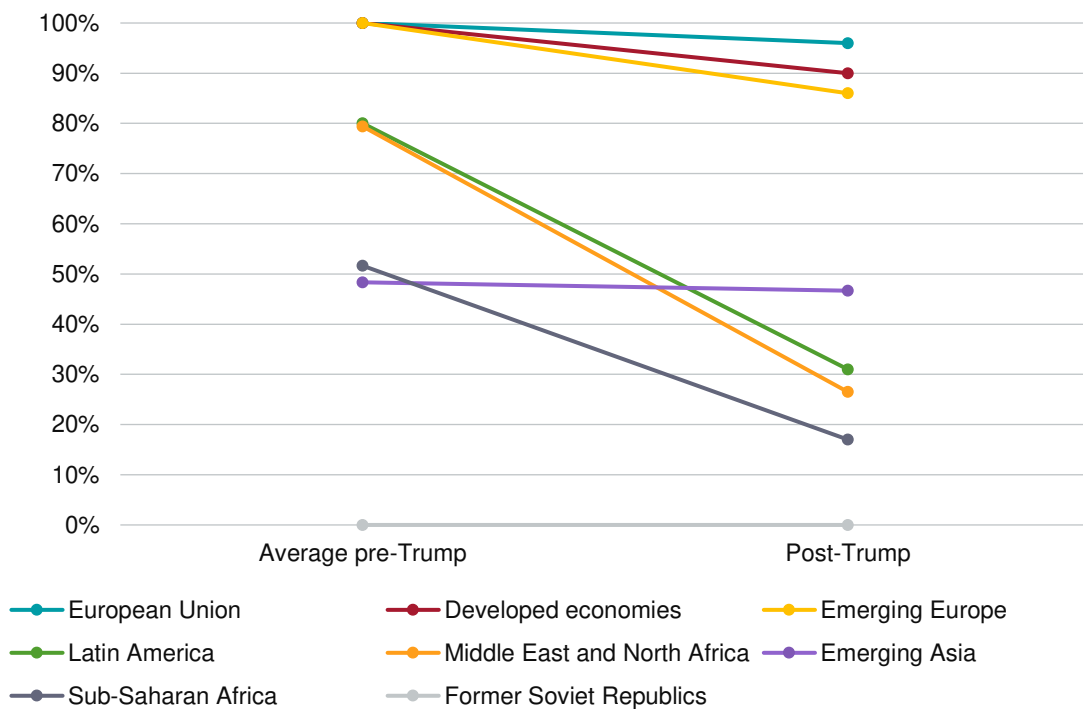
On 22 February 2025 a resolution of condemnation promoted by the EU and Ukraine was submitted for consideration by the UN General Assembly calling urgently for a de-escalation of the conflict and an immediate cessation of hostilities, stressing the need for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in accordance with the UN Charter and international law. It also condemns the continued aggression of the Russian Federation, reaffirms the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. Finally, it calls for the release of prisoners of war, an end to attacks on critical infrastructure and reinforces the call for international cooperation to address the global consequences of the conflict, including risks to food and energy security.

This resolution is similar in content and tone to the four pre-Trump resolutions we have classified as ‘condemnation of aggression and violation of territorial integrity’, so we will use the latter to analyse how the vote of countries within each of the blocs changed in the first (and so far only) post-Trump resolution condemning Russia. Let us recall that this category of condemnation resolutions is the one that attracts the most support from all the blocs.

These are the patterns that emerge (see Figure 3):

- The post-Trump US Copernican turn, which went from condemning Russia for the invasion of Ukraine in all previous resolutions to voting against condemnation in this one, was accompanied by a generalised drop, visible in all blocs, of support for Ukraine.
- In the EU, the rest of the developed countries and in Emerging Europe, support for Ukraine remained very strong, with occasional dissent: Hungary in the EU and Israel among the rest of the developed countries voting against the resolution in line with the US, and North Macedonia in Emerging Europe, which abstained.
- In Emerging Asia only Bangladesh changed its vote from supporting resolutions condemning Russia pre-Trump to abstaining. Emerging Asia's support for the post-Trump Russia condemnation resolution remained below 50% of the bloc's countries as in previous condemnation resolutions.
- In Latin America only 31% of countries voted in favour of the resolution, a very significant drop from the 80% of countries that voted for the pre-Trump condemnation resolutions. Only five countries maintained their support for Ukraine: Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. Countries that pre-Trump had condemned the Russian invasion, such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Panama and Paraguay, in the face of the US-turnaround changed their vote and abstained (Ecuador did not vote).
- In the Middle East and North Africa only 27% of countries voted in favour of the resolution, a very significant drop from 79% in pre-Trump condemnation resolutions. Only three countries maintained their support for Ukraine: Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. The rest of the countries that pre-Trump condemned the Russian invasion abstained. Among them: Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Iraq, Qatar and Kuwait.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa only 17% of countries voted in favour of the resolution, a very significant drop from 52% in the pre-Trump condemnation resolutions. Only a handful of countries among the more than 40 countries in this bloc maintained their support for Ukraine: Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Djibouti. The rest of the countries that pre-Trump had condemned the Russian invasion, changed their vote.
- The former Soviet republics that did not support any of the pre-Trump resolutions condemning Russia and did not support this one either.

**Figure 3. Support for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly: resolutions condemning aggression and violation of territorial integrity (pre and post Trump, % of countries in each bloc)**



Source: the authors based on UN data.

### 3. The great turnaround

It is natural and to be expected that the countries of the EU, the rest of developed countries and those of Emerging Europe, with very few exceptions, maintain their overwhelming support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia. This position is based on their commitment to the rules-based international order, the defence of sovereignty, territorial integrity and respect for international law, as pillars of their foreign policy. In the case of European countries, strategic and security considerations add up to the latter, with support for Ukraine being a way of avoiding precedents that could weaken regional security.

The answer is not so straightforward regarding the change in the positioning of emerging countries. There are two possible hypotheses that are contradictory with each other.

The first is that the emerging countries took advantage of the reconfiguration of the geopolitical balance to realign their interests. After all, many emerging countries have strong economic and strategic ties with China, which in the Ukrainian war, albeit with certain reservations, has supported Russia. According to this hypothesis, the change in US policy would have acted as a sort of catalyst for emerging countries to align their economic and political interests with foreign-policy decisions, without having to counterbalance them with those of the US.

This hypothesis does not sit well with Latin America. Except for Emerging Europe, Latin America is by far the most western of emerging regions. Between 2001 and 2023, in all those resolutions referring to human rights and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity –those that [Talvi & Leiva \(2023\)](#) associate with ‘values’– in which the US, the EU and the rest of the developed countries voted in favour and China and Russia against, 80% of Latin American countries aligned themselves with the Western bloc, to a much greater extent than the rest of the emerging regions: the Middle East and North Africa (37%), Sub-Saharan Africa (25%), the Former Soviet Republics (25%) and Emerging Asia (19%) (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Voting in UN General Assembly resolutions on human rights, sovereignty and territorial integrity, 2011-23 (% of countries aligned with the US/EU and with China/Russia, average of resolutions)**

	US/EU	China/Russia	Abstention
Emerging Europe	95.5	1	3.5
Latin America	79.5	5	15.5
Middle East and North Africa	37	31	32
Sub-Saharan Africa	25	23.5	51.5
Former Soviet Republics	24.5	69	6.5
Emerging Asia	19	43	38

Source: [Talvi & Leiva \(2023\)](#).

#### 4. The fear factor

An alternative hypothesis to explain the big swing in voting in emerging countries is what we call the fear factor: the fear of retaliation by the US.

Under the rules-based international order, dissent with US foreign policy could be sustained without fear of economic retaliation. After all, ensuring the smooth functioning of a rules-based order –which the US hitherto understood to benefit not only the global system but also itself– implies just that: that it is the rules, not the power of the strongest, that govern international relations.

However, with Trump’s drastic turn towards an alternative order based on power politics, in which the US acts in what it considers its own interest without taking into account the impact on the global system, nor whether they are allies or adversaries, it may have induced many countries, especially emerging ones, to re-evaluate their stance on the Ukraine war, to avoid economic sanctions or other negative consequences derived from not aligning with the new US foreign policy. Ultimately, power politics transforms dissent into a decision fraught with strategic risks and this explains the shift of emerging countries, especially in Latin America, from a position of principle to one of survival.



## Conclusions

The abrupt reversal of the US position upon Donald J. Trump assuming his second presidency—from unanimously supporting the 10 resolutions against Russian aggression against Ukraine at the UN General Assembly to opposing them in the vote on 22 February—marked the end of the liberal international order, fractured a historic consensus with its transatlantic allies and highlighted how emerging countries are re-evaluating their strategic interests in the face of a U-turn in US foreign policy.

Under the previous rules-based international order, not aligning with the US in foreign policy did not carry the risk of economic retaliation, which allowed emerging countries to hold principled positions or act according to their own interests. However, in the new order governed by power politics, the ‘fear factor’—particularly in Latin America, which had overwhelmingly supported previous resolutions condemning Russia—has turned dissent into a decision fraught with strategic risks, prompting these countries to abandon principled positions to one of survival.