

Opinion

Why Namibia's vote on Russia violates its foreign policy principles

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When the United Nations General Assembly in an emergency session on 2 March took a vote on the war against Ukraine, Namibia abstained with 15 other African states. One (Eritrea) voted with no and nine as no shows did not vote at all. 28 African yes-votes (among these seven co-sponsors of the resolution) joined 113 other member states.

The voting pattern documents that there is no Pan-Africanism in practice. The same applies to the member states of the Non-aligned Movement. Claims that non-alignment means abstention in conflicts holds no water. Pseudo neutrality does in fact take sides with aggressors. Refraining from condemnation of wrongdoing translates such “non-alignment” into not taking sides with principles of a global order.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) voted on 28 February to urgently debate the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Here too, Namibia decided like 12 other members to abstain, while 29 voted in favour and five against. Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (at the same time the Deputy Prime Minister) justified the abstention. As quoted in a local newspaper:

“Why not abstain? I am saying we are monitoring and evaluating the situation, and I want to draw [your attention] to Article 96 of the Namibian Constitution. That is what is guiding us in handling issues such as this.”

Namibia's Constitution is indeed a worthwhile reference point. Article 96 outlines the country's foreign policy principles, based on non-alignment. But it stresses adherence to fundamental value-based norms in the international system:

- Article 96(b) commits to the promotion of peace and security;
- Article 96(d) stresses respect for international law and treaty obligations;
- Article 96(e) emphasises the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means.

This framework does not condone warfare, invasion, occupation, or any other denial of the right to self-determination of people in sovereign states. President Geingob has confirmed such understanding. Addressing the UN General Assembly on 26 September 2018 he warned that the world drifted away from dialogue towards unilateral action. He appealed to embrace multilateralism and stressed: “Democracy might have its flaws, but it is by far the best system that enables key values of the United Nations.”

During the 79th UN General Assembly debate on 24 September 2020 he declared: “As a nation that has experienced the outpouring of international solidarity during the dark days of our struggle for independence, we wish to express our continued support for the right to self-determination and freedom of the peoples of Palestine and Western Sahara.” His statement at the 2021 General Assembly concluded: “through unity, we will revitalize the United Nations, transforming it into a bastion of global democracy that will save the world from the scourge of war and reaffirm faith in the fundamental human rights, dignity and worth of each and every human being on this planet.”

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Namibia's foreign policy is guided by the slogan "a friend to all and enemy to none". As a recent analysis suggests, the country has "fair-weather friends" and in China "one all-weather friend". While bonds with the former Soviet Union (in as much as Cuba, for that matter) have left deep marks and loyalties, Russia has not played a prominent role in Namibia's day-to-day public culture. However, voting patterns in the United Nations displayed a knee jerk response in refusing to take any critical distance to the former main supporters of the anti-colonial struggle. This includes Namibia's friendly relations with North Korea. These countries are not measured against any violation of fundamental principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. They are rewarded with loyalty for their role during the struggle days.

But the loyalty with Moscow comes with a flaw. After all, Ukraine's Independence as a sovereign state came only after that of Namibia with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukrainians therefore were as much an integral part of Soviet solidarity with Namibia's liberation struggle as Russians were. At the same time, Namibia's history also brought about a strong affinity to the United Nations as the facilitator of diplomacy and mediation towards Namibian Independence. The government repeatedly declares the UN system as the midwife to Namibian Independence. This explicitly recognises the role the global governance body should and could play.

In his 2020 UN General Assembly address Geingob declared that for 75 years the world has averted a Third World War. This testifies to the "success of this great human experiment in multilateralism". He recognised "the pivotal role this distinguished organisation has played to promote and sustain world peace, and in the decolonisation of Africa. As Namibians, we can attest to this fact, given our own history."

By abstaining now, Namibia betrays fundamental values practised by all those in solidarity with and international support of the struggle for self-determination.