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A VIEW ON THE WEST FROM THE VANTAGE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to draw a macro picture of the 'West' with reference to colonialism, wars and Russia-Ukraine issue. It focusses on the identity of 'West' as a socio-politico-cultural construct. The theory of social constructivism has been extensively used in order to project the identity of the 'West'. The paper addresses the question of how west has remained the center of the global politics or why the global politics is western centric? It covers the period and process of colonization with the application of historical method in brief. The significance of wars starting from the World War-I to the ongoing war in between Russia and Ukraine and the consequences of war on human and environment have been part of the study. The paper throws light on the attitude of the west towards the rest of the world during the time of pandemic. It uncovers the dichotomy in preaching and practice of western values. The western perception of retaining the hegemonic status forever is seriously challenged with the emergence of a changing world order. The paper also encompasses the lessons that can be learnt from the case of India. The study highlights India's exceptional standing in the world order as exemplar to the rest of the world.

Keywords: West, Colonialism, War, Pandemic, Environment, Constructivism, Identity.

Introduction

There is a paradigm shift in the pattern of looking at the West in the context of epidemic and war. West is held as the precursor of modern democracy and liberal values. People of third world have been colonized and coerced for centuries in the hands of western countries. The world has witnessed two world wars originated and largely happened in the West. It would be worth to mention before looking at the west from the prism of constructivism that its contribution to the world in terms of science and technology is enormous. At the same time the technology and its power have retained the power to the west in maintaining its dominance over the rest of the world. The positive and negative effects of western development model have been spread out to the third world countries. On the one hand the over exploitation of nature with the help of technology has been harbinger of catastrophic effect in the environment and the wars waged by the western countries for reasons known to all, have been critical in vitiating the image of west on the other. The process of impoverishing the third world countries and endangering the environment has not yet reached to its logical end.

Many often the questions that strike to our mind in general that how west has been the foundation upon which all sort of destructive and negative activities are taken place? How the west is projected as the central pillar of the world? Why the whole world is western centric even in the decolonized era? All these questions which are inquisitive in the mind of scholars have turned to be burning one in the context of Russia-Ukraine war. A war that sparked in February 2022 and still in continuance in between the two countries which in past have shared many objectives in common under the umbrella of USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Russia). Both sides have advanced the arguments in justifying their cause and stand in the whole issue. Russian President Vladimir Putin is hell-bent upon its position of defending the security and protecting interest of Russia. On the other end of the spectrum Mr. Volodymyr Zelenskyy is reaching out many leaders of the world for an amicable solution to the situation on ground. There are ranges of opinions which are divided and diverse on the issue of what is the reason and which side is appropriate in the case. But this paper is not focused to find out the underlying reasons of Russia- Ukraine War. Though the incident of war is a flash point in the study. This is an attempt to present a macro picture of the west applying the framework of social constructivism. It covers the image of West from the beginning of the colonization to the recent pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war in a nutshell.

CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK IN BRIEF

The most important to constructivist arguments are such basic principles as "discourse," identity," "norms," and "socialization" that are regularly employed in contemporary discussion over numerous topics of international concern including "globalization, security issues, human rights etc. According to constructivist theory the identities and interests of actors are "the products of inter-subjective social structure,". The constructivist theory challenges the materialists and rationalists' foundations of the mainstream IR theory by arguing that the international relations structures are "socially constructed" and that "these structures shape



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actor's identities and interests rather than just their behaviors." It has various forms and foci and has thus been referred to as an "approach" to the analysis of international politics.

Social constructivism is much more than what is explained in nutshell. But one of the major premises of it is the 'focus' on identity. Identity and interest play significant role in shaping the world politics. The paper is an attempt to reimagine the overall identity of the 'West' as a cultural construct and the collective interest of the Western world as a political grouping which is popularly known as the 'Global North'. The world has been western centric in terms of its cultural and economic advancement. West has sustained its image as a role model for the rest of the world. People in the Global South feel proud to get employed and resident in the West. They also received attention back at their own state because they are part of the developed world. The fascination of west has somehow remained intact. But with dented picture in the rise of Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war. When the whole world was looking towards the west to withstand the pandemic and get solution to save millions of lives, west was deeply self-centered and self-focused.

The billionaire of west who have earned name and fame across the world for their concern of human rights and generous contribution to the cause of democracy and liberal value- turned their eyes blind to the billion people in the Global South by taking apathetic stand.ⁱ The whole world was almost got rid of the deadly pandemic and life was gradually turning to be normal and in the meanwhile Russia invaded Ukraine under the pretext of special military operation to demilitarize its neighbor.ⁱⁱ The war in between the two countries is still continuing and the world is suffering on many accounts for the ongoing impasse.

So, in order to get a recent picture of the West in the views of East, we need to throw some light on the recent past of the West with the application of basic premises of social constructivism. History bears a crucial place in determining the identity of actor and in sequence the identity and interest which formulate the situation of conflict and cooperation. The very existence of European Union is testimony of spectacular instance of cooperation among several countries of Europe who have indulged in furious wars, overcoming the conflicting scenario in the past. Time and again, we have the similar situation where a war is taking place in between two European countries for nearly a year. But what the moot question we are dealing with is what are the repercussion of the circumstances existing in Europe to the rest of the world for the last two centuries.

19TH CENTURY WESTERN WORLD

At the very beginning the curiosity led European ventured into the ocean and exploration of new lands and with the turn of the events they established trade relation with the newly founded territories. The naivety and technologically underdeveloped people of these newly discovered territories tempted the European to subdue and subjugate them for centuries. The natural resources were rubbed for hundred years to meet the industrial need in Europe. Throughout the Europe, the 19th century was a time of immense upheaval. Wars were fought often during that period, frequently for profit rather than for the good of humanity. Nations and empires clashed frequently during this time in an effort to gain more control over resources and territory. These conflicts resulted in tremendous losses of human life and misery because they were fueled by the desire for wealth and power. Although certain technological and industrial advancements were accomplished at this time, it can be argued that these conflicts were ultimately waged for wealth rather than for the good of humanity.

Countries like Britain sought colonies in Africa and Asia that would offer ports and possibly even material resources in their quest for greater prosperity. So, a major driver was the potential economic gain of establishing colonies. Many colonies might provide raw materials like oil, tin, gold, and diamonds. By claiming these territories, European nations eliminate the middleman. Due to their direct control over the resources, they were no longer need to trade. By 1914, Germany, Portugal, France, Belgium, Britain, and Spain had all established colonies in Africa. The Brits, Dutch, Russians, French, and Portuguese had also seized some territory in Asia.

There was mad rush to establish colonies amongst European powers in Asia, Africa and Latin America. People were colonized and coerced for centuries and left to begin from the scratch for everything else. These colonies have never been party to any wars voluntarily, in fact, they had no locus standi in the business of wars. The wars were fought to establish dominance and control over natural resources and people of Asia and Africa. Basically, it was a struggle for power within Europe to establish dominance over non-European people. This particular situation of long standing wars has led to the immense degrading effect on environment. Some of the European powers have thrived on the profit earned from the business of providing arms and weapons to the militarily less developed countries in Asia and Africa.



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Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data 2020.

European Country	% of Total Arms Exports to Asia	% of Total Arms Exports to Africa
France	30%	36%
Russia	23%	23%
Germany	17%	6.8%
Italy	8.6%	8.1%
United Kingdom	8.4%	N/A*
Spain	N/A*	5.5%

The table represents the weapons imported by Asia and African countries from Europe. The table does not mention about the arms trade data of US which is the largest arms exporter to Asia and Africa. Asia and Oceania accounted for 42 per cent of arms imports in 2016–20, followed by the Middle East (33 per cent).ⁱⁱⁱ The point of highlighting the arms and weapons exported by the West to the Asia and Africa is noteworthy in the context of drawing a macro image using the ‘West’ with the basic premises of social constructivism. During the colonial era, the countries of Asia and Africa were directly controlled by the west and now they are the potential clients of West in terms of Arms trade. So what identity of the ‘West’ can be formulated with the past experiences of colonialism and the chaotic condition existing in Europe centred around the Russia- Ukraine war?

THE PROCESS OF COLONIZATION

The process of colonialization was brutal. The people and resources of colonies were captured and rubbed without any consideration of universal morality. The economic and social development of Asia and Africa has been significantly impacted by the colonial process, resulting in extreme poverty and underdevelopment. Several nations in Asia and Africa continue to suffer with extreme poverty, slow economic growth, and shoddy infrastructure and services, according to World Bank data.^{iv} The extraction of resources is one of the key ways that colonization has contributed to the poverty in Asia and Africa. According to historian Walter Rodney, "Europe's exploitation of Africa and Asia over a period of four centuries was not confined to the use of the territories as suppliers of labors and raw materials. The entire process was designed to keep these regions from developing and maintain their status of underdevelopment."^v

Additionally, colonization has had a long-lasting impact on the social and economic development of Asia and Africa, which has resulted in a lack of investment in crucial sectors like healthcare, education, and other. As economist Dani Rodrick pointed out, "Colonial powers had no interest in fostering native institutions or skills. They preferred to extract raw materials and resources. Because of this, the colonial powers left a weak institutional system and an underdeveloped local economy in its wake."^{vi} In general, the colonization process has had a significant and long-lasting effect on the economic and social development of Asia and Africa, which has exacerbated widespread poverty and underdevelopment. As economist Joseph Stiglitz pointed out, "The rich have historically taken advantage of the poor. Nonetheless, the extent of the exploitation that occurred during colonization is astounding. The repercussions are still being felt today and will continue to affect future generations."^{vii}

THE CONSEQUENCES OF WORLD WARS

The very term ‘World War’ itself is subject to contestation. Scholars of different hue many often raise their objection regarding the attribution of the terms ‘World War’ to the wars fought largely in West and for the interest of western powers at large. But the paper is least focussed on linguistic politics and its implication. This is an attempt to understand the West historically within the framework of social constructivism which put immense emphasis on identity of individual states, based upon their past experiences. Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world were significantly impacted by both World Wars I and II, which were western conflicts. These wars significantly altered the political and economic climate of the world while also causing great destruction, death, and human displacement.

Several nations in Asia and Africa that were protectorates or colonies of European powers involved actively in World War I. The First World War, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm, "was above all a world war in the sense that it included the whole



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world." Many more people were impacted by the war's aftermath than the millions of soldiers from Asia and Africa who participated in it.^{viii} The rise of nationalist movements and anti-colonial feeling in Asia and Africa was one of the main impacts of World War I. After the war, as European nations battled to recover, they were obliged to deal with mounting calls for independence from their colonies. In the decades that followed the war, several nations in Asia and Africa attained independence as a result of this, which sparked a wave of decolonization.

Due to the massive destruction and human casualties brought on by World War II, these regions were even more severely affected. Because to their extensive involvement in the war effort, many nations in Asia and Africa also experienced substantial economic and infrastructure devastation. Significant political and economic changes were brought about by the end of World War II in both Asia and Africa. As a result of the liberation of numerous nations from colonial domination, a bipolar international order headed by the United States and the Soviet Union emerged.^{ix} Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world have all been significantly and permanently impacted by World Wars I and II. These conflicts had a long lasting impression on history and now have a huge influence on global politics and economics. The ongoing war in between Russia and Ukraine can be seen in sequence of the wars occurred in 19th century western world.

WESTERN ATTITUDE DURING PANDEMIC

The pandemic has portrayed a new and different image of West towards the Asia and Africa. The tone and tenor of western countries were incompatible with what it is assumed to be in the past. To be more specific, that grand image of a savior of human rights and democracy was sketchy. The COVID-19 epidemic has brought to light a number of biases and prejudices against many nations and areas of the world. Western nations have come under close scrutiny for how they have handled the pandemic in Asian and African nations. Since the pandemic first began to spread, there have also been worries about prejudice and xenophobia directed at Asian communities in Western nations.^x This was demonstrated by the increase in hate crimes committed against Asian Americans both domestically and abroad.

Concerns have also been raised regarding how the epidemic will affect African nations, notably in terms of healthcare availability and the pandemic's economic effects.^{xi} Western nations have come under fire for failing to assist these nations, with demands for debt relief and additional help. The attitudes of Western countries regarding Asian and African nations during COVID-19 have also been discussed in India. Asian communities in Western nations, notably the United States and Europe, have seen a number of incidents of racism and xenophobia, according to Indian media reports.^{xii} Concerns have also been raised regarding the pandemic's effects on African nations and the lack of assistance from Western nations.

The disparate strategies used by Asian and Western nations to combat the pandemic have also been emphasised by the Indian media. While Western nations have come under fire for their delayed response and lack of preparedness, nations like South Korea and Taiwan have been hailed for their successful control of the pandemic. Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that not all Western nations during the pandemic share the same sentiments regarding Asian and African nations. Certain nations, including Germany and Canada, have received appreciation for their assistance to underdeveloped nations and support of international efforts to combat the pandemic. The Indian media has often criticised Western countries' attitude to Asian and African nations throughout the pandemic while emphasising the need for more international solidarity and collaboration in resolving the crisis.^{xiii}



Source: worldatlas.com accessed on 9th March 2023.



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RUSSIA-UKRAINE SAGA

The genesis of Russia –Ukraine issue can be traced back the cold war era when Ukraine was a part of Soviet Union. The above map highlights the location and proximity of both the Russia and Ukraine. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine achieved its independence, but its relationship with Russia remained complicated. The question of whether Ukraine is more inclined towards Russia or the West is one of the major reasons that have sparked the conflict. Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian leader of Ukraine, was overthrown from office in 2013 as a result of demonstrations calling for stronger ties with the European Union. Russia retaliated by annexing Crimea in March 2014 as a result of this being perceived as a setback to its power in the area. The international community strongly disagreed with this action, and as a result, Russia was subject to sanctions. The conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, displacement of people, and a humanitarian crisis.^{xiv}

Along with economic and geopolitical interests, the conflict's origins can also be found in the historical and cultural links that unite Russia and Ukraine. As Ukraine seeks to protect its independence and sovereignty, Russia views Ukraine as a crucial geopolitical buffer zone against the West. Many theories as to the origins and causes of the conflict differ due to its complexity and varied nature. The complicated history and relationships between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the fight for dominance and power in the region, are undoubtedly the causes of the conflict.^{xv} What does it imply when a war is taking place for more than a year, endangering the lives and livelihood of millions people? A couple of hypotheses can be offered applying the framework of social constructivism. Both Russia and Ukraine were part of Soviet Union and both possess cultural and linguistic similarities. The disintegration of Soviet Union and aftermath Russia lost the position of a formidable rival to US. The post-Soviet period is popularly held as a unipolar world order.

The identity of Russia and Ukraine in a number of ways have common ground. But the assertion of Russia to defend its security and interest vis-à-vis the influence of NATO and the proposed incorporation of the Ukraine as a member irked the former and it repelled the latter's agenda by launching military operation. Let us see it from the perspective of Ukraine which used to be part of Soviet and got independent with the collapse Soviet Union. By the turn of events, it shaded its wish to develop and strengthen its military capability under the influence of disarmament and liberal democratic values that promise for peaceful and harmonious world. Ukraine's pursuit of independent policy itself is not the bone of contention. But its choice of being allied with NATO is a matter of strategic insecurity to Russia. Amidst all these tussles who is worst affected is the Ukrainian people whom the United Nation even has been failed to protect from the onslaught. But without digging it into further detail let me put forward what image it has generated about west worldwide in the next section.

LESSIONS FROM INDIA

There are struggle in west and across world for a stable and peaceful time ahead. The existing anthropogenic effects of environmental degradation and recent war situation have pushed the world to some indefinite uncertainties. At this juncture there are many lessons that can be taken from India. India as a nation who has undergone centuries of colonialism and brutal subjugation in the hands of European powers and in return it has demonstrated exemplar instances of non-violence, tolerance and love for mankind. Instead of its bitter experiences of colonialism, it has never been resentful to the Europe. Moreover, the struggle of India is not ended with its liberation from the clutches of European power, it's the worst affected country by the state backed terrorism sponsored by a small neighbor of it. Besides, being the worst victim of terrorism, it has never thought of annexing and taking over the territory of the rogue state which is the breeding ground of terrorism. Its attempt to reprimand the particular state in the international entities has not only been thwarted by western country rather the country in point has received both military and financial aid from the west.

The above cited exceptional instances are not sufficient enough to demonstrate the kind of messages it sends out for the rest of the world. In the attempt to address its security-concern in the face of an expansionist neighbor with whom it has woeful experience of maintaining brotherhood and in response it has met with aggression, defeat, ceding its territory, sporadic border incursions and at the same time the west has not hesitated in imposing sanction on India during its nuclear test in 1998. There can be a number of examples which are testimony of India's exceptional standing in the present world order. India truly offers the world to co-exist with difference and diversities. It voices for an equitable and all accommodating world order. It continuously claims for a reasonable and dialogue based reformation in the UN which should reflect the idea of equity, sovereignty and democracy.

APPLYING CONSTRUCTIVIST PRISM

Social constructivism is not only a theory that challenges the dominant mainstream theories of international relations but it also provides ample of ground to relook and reshape the world politics in the context of reframing the anarchic world to an order based international system. In the premises of constructivism, identity and meaning are not fixed.^{xvi} Social realities are socially



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constructed. The role of ideas, norms and culture play significant role in shaping the identity and determining the interest of actors. So in the above analysis the identity of the 'west' based on its past experiences, norms and shared history with the rest of the world, can be drawn in the context of politics, wars and colonialism. Further, the identities are socially constructed through interaction and shared meaning with other actors.^{xvii} So in the same line the identity of the 'West' to the rest has changed to be negative and dented. The west is collectively failed to generate an identity that could be potential to transform the western world form a power and material seeking international community to an order based, harmonious and peaceful society.

The west is entangled in its own ideas of identity and interest. The pursuit of economic power and material resources at the cost of others, are unending lust. If the years of war in between Russia and Ukraine is not able to shake the collective consciousness of western countries, then what could be the image of the west as a whole to the region which have undergone the sorrow and suffering of colonization for centuries of time? The paper is not delving into the matter of who is on the right side and who is wrong with respect to the Russia-Ukraine war. The paper is primarily an attempt to sort of building a prospective identity of the 'western world' in the rise of Russia-Ukraine war looking at the 'West' from the vantage of social constructivism. The irony is that even after a year passed in remaining engaged in fatal war in between Russia and Ukraine, the leaders of both side have not been able to put the issue on table and have a dialogue on possible solution to it. This is a high time for the western countries to stress upon the collective identity of the 'West' before it being too late.

There is a tectonic shift has already begun to take place in the world order. If the western-industrialized developed countries remain in the thought of that they would enjoy the status-quo positon forever, then it would be an assumption of blatantly wrong. The example is in front of all that Russia-Ukraine both used to be close ally at a point of time are now dead enemy of each other. Likewise, the formerly colonial countries who have endured the wrath of imperialism should not put into test for longer without meeting the due treatment in the international organizations. Further, the onus of restoring the polluted environment to the posterity is largely rest upon the industrialized western countries. The moral responsibility lies with the west to assist the third world nations in achieving a threshold in sustainable development goal. The immediate step is to cease the ongoing war in between Russia and Ukraine along with addressing the pressing issues which explained earlier, could be helpful in retaining the identity of 'West' before it erodes to worst in future.

CONCLUSION

The image of the west does not appear positive in the context of colonialism, imperialism and Russia-Ukraine war. It seems the western countries are deeply rooted in the culture of realism which implies the pursuit of unending material power and anarchy as a constant phenomenon in international relation. The tenets of constructivism which emphasizes on the ideas, norms and discourses are not yet emerged in the western world-view. Though the theory of social constructivism is originated and developed in the west but the practice of the same can be found in India. The largely non-violent struggle for freedom at first place and the policy of remaining Non-aligned during the cold-war politics are rock-solid examples of not accepting the power view of politics. The present stand of India with reference to Russia-Ukraine war is in line with the Non-alignment policy which it has propounded in post-independent India.

India has never transgressed or violated the sovereignty of any country whether small or big in the history. Rather, it has been cooperative all the way to its neighboring and distant countries. The recent humanitarian help form India in Earth-quake ravaged Turkey is a glaring example of great and exceptional stand of it. The resolution that passed in the UN in condemning Russia where India remained absent and the earlier attempt of West to sermonize it on the democratic and moral value pointing at the purchasing of oil from Russia is a point in futile. It is well known that India is energy deficient country and oil is the bare necessity of it. Moreover, India is consistent in its policy of non-alignment in its foreign affairs. There can be number of examples where the West has taken hypocritical stands. Instead of pointing finger towards India it would be apt for the West to revisit and reconfigure its basic policies in politics, economics and environment.

The statement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is that; "this is not an ear for war", implies great sense to the world. The absent in UN resolution and importing oil from Russia does not mean India is in agreement what happening in Russia and Ukraine. India is principally opposed to the idea of war and aggression. By not taking any stand India has taken a huge stand in the context of war. The root of the war can be found in the cold war. But the war taking place in the West is certainly not cold war anymore. It is coldly fought bloody wars. It's the west at the helm of affairs to thwart war and aggression at the same time the responsibility lies with it to save image by adopting the fundamental premises enshrined in the theory of social constructivism.



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