[**Exceptionalist wars**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1680740/exceptionalist-wars)

[Fahd Humayun](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1701/fahd-humayun)Published March 19, 2022

The writer is a PhD candidate at Yale University.

RUSSIA’s invasion of Ukraine has unleashed a host of global anxieties. But it has also given rise to a growing cultural discomfort, felt strongest in many parts of the Global South that is no stranger to either the universality or destructiveness of global conflict.

Some of the unease in these countries is a product of the hard geopolitical choices that East-West tensions are forcing on smaller states. Nearly all the countries that did not endorse a UNGA resolution demanding Russia’s withdrawal from Ukraine are in the Global South. But the global reaction to a war in Europe has also been racially and culturally alienating to many countries that have borne the brunt of great power wars, only to see their experiences turned into fodder for tropes about the kinds of places where wars get fought.

While much of the coverage of the conflict has rightfully struck an overwhelmingly urgent note, many in the non-Western world feel this is because of, rather than in spite of, the race, ethnicity and religion of key conflict actors: white, European and largely Christian. As such, the global outcry is seen to be distinctly at odds with reactions to analogous interventions in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, which are perceived to be seen as less deserving of global calls to action.

The war in Ukraine is not the first conflict to lay bare the racialising biases underpinning which wars elicit global sympathy, and which wars lock in viewership or readership. Studies show that despite the simultaneity of both their breakout and duration, the war in the Balkans received 25 times more coverage than the Rwandan genocide across six major US newspapers, even though the Rwandan genocide resulted in eight times as many deaths. Even when the conflict in Rwanda was at its most intense stage to date, during early April 1994, US newspapers were twice as likely to run stories on Bosnia. In more recent times, when the war in Iraq reached its seven-year mark in 2010, it was estimated that just one per cent of US news coverage was dedicated to the war — 2,505 Iraqi civilians were killed in bombings that year.

The reaction to war in Europe has been racially alienating.

Research on race in international relations has shown that racial similarities deflate foreign threat perception, while racial differences inflate foreign threat perception. More recently, this has been used to explain just why 20th-century transatlantic security cooperation took the distinct multilateral form that it did. There is carry-over into 21st-century grand strategy. In 2019, the director of the State Department’s policy planning staff was reported to be of the opinion that China “pose[d] a unique challenge … because the regime in Beijing isn’t a child of Western philosophy and history”; and that the coming conflict with China is “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian”.

Related research carried out in the US has found that racially resentful White Americans are 45 percentage points more likely to support the bombing of hypothetical Iranian nuclear sites.

Race and racial identity, in turn, have powerful sanitising effects around concepts such ‘good’ wars, ‘hegemony’ and ‘soft power’. These concepts, it has been argued, prevent many in the West from objectively applying the same standards of anti-colonial critique to America’s own racialised brand of internationalism — ranging from how anti-Japanese racism guided US behaviour in World War II, to the ease with which America was able to relax its rules of engagement for air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan after 2001.

This sense of exceptionalism has resulted in a troubling historical devaluation of some of the biggest human catastrophes of the 20th century, from the Bengal famine under the British in India; to the grisly bombing of Cambodia under Henry Kissin­ger. Given Joe Bi­­den’s own justifications on ending US involvement in Af­­ghanistan focused exclusively on saving American ra­­ther than Afghan lives, it is of little surprise that press reporting from Kabul engaged in racialised tropes requiring hasty ex-poste clarifications. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, few media outlets reported on the irony in Condoleezza Rice, a figurehead in the US invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, telling a bemused Fox News anchor that invading a sovereign nation was “against every principle of international law and international order”.

History tells us that racism is built into the political idioms that determine not only which wars get airtime, but how coverage affects the institutional memory of conflict. The tragedy of war forced on innocent Ukrainians is indisputable. But the vocabulary of a global commentariat looking to reify cultural distinctions around the conflict based on its geographical location speaks to a troubling apathy towards many other, equally painful interventions. Especially when their effects still happen to be visible.

*The writer is a PhD candidate at Yale University.*
**Twitter** [@fahdhumayun](https://twitter.com/fahdhumayun)

*Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2022*