

Sri Lanka's Principled Neutrality Ensured Its Survival in the Economic Crisis Thus Far

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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The Indian Ocean island nation of Sri Lanka is being crushed by the worst economic crisis in its history, but it's managed to survive this far due to its [principled neutrality](#) towards [Russia's ongoing special military operation](#) in Ukraine. Instead of jumping on the US-led Western bandwagon by voting against Russia at the UN and subsequently sanctioning it like could have been expected from such an economically desperate country that's urgently in need of IMF aid, its leaders wisely rejected that counterproductive path by instead [abstaining twice](#) from doing so.

Shortly after, it was revealed that it purchased a 90,000-metric-ton shipment of Russian oil in order to restart its refinery, after which Prime Minister Wickremesinghe told the Associated Press in an [exclusive interview](#) this weekend that he's interested in buying more from it if he can't find other suppliers and is also exploring the purchase of Russian wheat too. These two literally live-saving options might not have been available to his country had it compromised on its position of principled neutrality by submitting to the US-led West at the UN.

There's a lesson to be learned from Sri Lanka's experience, which is that the pursuit of strategic autonomy and the [enhanced sovereignty](#) that it leads to enables countries to keep the largest number of options open during times of crisis. Apart from its principled neutrality towards the Ukrainian Conflict, this island nation's efforts to balance between China and India have also been beneficial for its interests since [both Great Powers](#) are trying to help it to varying extents as was [predicted](#) early last month. Had it chosen one over the other, then its options would have been limited.

That said, none of its multipolar partners are going to bail Sri Lanka out for free. What they'll likely do, however, is offer it privileged support such as discounted resources in Russia's case or grants and low-interest loans in China's and India's. Nevertheless, it'll also probably turn out that this country will have to inevitably seek support from the US-led IMF at some point or another, though hopefully the support it'll receive from its partners before then will reduce the amount of aid that it'll be compelled to request. That can in turn result in the most minimal erosion of its sovereignty.

The Sri Lankan case is instructive for many Global South countries [like Pakistan](#), which might soon find themselves in similar situations. The lingering economic consequences of the international community's uncoordinated response to containing COVID coupled with the latest shocks caused by the US-led West's [unprecedented anti-Russian sanctions](#) and the [artificially manufactured food crisis](#) that's connected with them will deal a heavy blow to many developing countries' economies. If they abandon their principled neutrality, then they'll be entirely dependent on the US-led West for survival.

There's no doubt that this bloc will exploit them by attaching political strings to the aid that they're offered, which will inevitably lead to them losing their sovereignty and thus becoming neo-imperial colonies. By retaining their principled neutrality, however, these Global South states can reduce the amount of aid that they'll request from the US-led West, which will lead to them preserving as much of their strategic autonomy and state sovereignty as possible. Considering this, while Sri Lanka is just a tiny developing country, the precedent that it establishes carries outsized influence among the Global South.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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About the author:

Andrew Korybko est le commentateur politique étasunien qui travaille actuellement pour l'agence Sputnik. Il est en troisième cycle de l'Université MGIMO et auteur de la monographie Guerres hybrides: l'approche adaptative indirecte pour un changement de régime(2015).

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