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Russia in a Post-Bipolar World

Alexander Lukin

Near the turn of the twenty-first century, one of the two poles of the system that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War destroyed itself. The Soviet communist project had become uncompetitive, leading to its failure. Soviet ideology had cornered itself. Derived from the Western Enlightenment tradition, its ideas of technological progress and the satisfaction of people's physical needs were not new. But Soviet ideology vowed that faster progress would be achieved not by enhancing self-rule and respect for individual rights and private property, but by concentrating resources in the hands of the state, nationalising property and ensuring its fair distribution. This project proved economically unviable. In addition, the Soviet Union set for itself the ideological goal of spreading its system to as many countries as possible and, eventually, to the whole world. This ambition wasted considerable resources and exacerbated economic problems.

Prior to the Soviet collapse, the world's first-ever bipolar system had both positive and negative aspects. On the downside, people living in countries and territories controlled by the Soviet Union enjoyed very little freedom and had to struggle with the indignities of life under totalitarian regimes. Perhaps more significantly, the control (and ambitions for control) exercised by the United States and the Soviet Union over large parts of the world, and the rules they imposed on the conduct of international relations, provoked conflicts on neutral territories, with virtually any local dispute in the

Alexander Lukin is Head of the Department of International Relations at the National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

Third World becoming contested between the two powers. On the upside, these did not approach the scale of the world wars. The Soviet Union and the West were able to find consensus on the principle of non-interference in each other's spheres of interest, and on some mutually accepted rules, which sometimes took the form of written documents, such as the Helsinki Accords, nuclear non-proliferation agreements, and documents reducing and banning weapons of mass destruction.

The collapse of the Soviet Union under the weight of its own internal problems appeared at first to be a triumph for the West. Certainly, the United States and its allies enjoyed a strong, if not decisive, influence over international affairs in the early 1990s. Their apparent victory in the confrontation with the Soviet camp had made the Western political and economic model more popular. Many of the former communist states sought to join NATO and the European Union, while others, including Russia itself, elected leaders who appeared sincere in their appreciation for the West. The United States and its allies also found themselves unmatched in terms of military capabilities.

Yet the break-up of the Soviet bloc did little to alter certain key trends in global development. Non-Western centres of power, such as China, India and Brazil, continued to become stronger, seeking to solve their own problems and protect their own interests, at least along their borders. Although they were open to cooperation with the West (and certainly sought no confrontation with it, in part because they lacked the means), they did not necessarily share the West's goals, and in some cases were quite worried about them.

The remains of the Soviet empire itself contained a range of attitudes. While some Eastern European countries (excluding Serbia, which had not been part of the Soviet empire) had agreed to join the Western system, the new Russian authorities hoped for cooperation based on equality and a common understanding of global goals. The Central Asian republics, fearing a drive for Western-style democratisation, either gravitated towards Russia, tried to balance between Russia and the West, or opted for autarky.

Given these trends, the United States and its allies could have pursued a balanced policy to maintain their influence through improved relations with

other global players. Russia, for example, could have been integrated to a significant extent into the Western system if it had been admitted to NATO, as James Baker, US secretary of state under George H.W. Bush, suggested,¹ or if it had benefited from a flexible policy combining real assistance with due respect for Moscow's interests and concerns. This might have produced a close partnership with Russia without requiring any formal alliance, in much the same way that the United States had partnered with Mexico, or with Egypt under presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

This was a realistic scenario, but it would have required concessions and compromises which were seen as incompatible with the ideological goals that were then being pursued with increasing vigour by Western politicians. Intellectuals in the United States and Europe had long been tilting towards the ideology of 'democratism', a one-sided mixture of political liberalism, human-rights thinking, Enlightenment secularism and theories of Western supremacy that strongly resembled colonialism. As a result, the West attempted, as it had done so many times before, to impose upon the world its own model as a universal solution.

The rise and fall of the Western model

The desired end state of Western universalism has taken many forms over the years. A drive to spread the Christian faith worldwide during the Crusades eventually gave way to the 'civilising' mission of the colonial era, which, in turn, has been replaced by the pursuit of 'democracy' and 'human rights'. What has never changed, however, has been the idea of supremacy underpinning these goals. Many civilisations, such as the Chinese and the Greek, have considered everyone but themselves to be barbarians. Yet they did not necessarily attempt to impose their ideas upon the rest of the world. Before the collapse of the twentieth century's bipolar order, there were two systems attempting to do so, one guided by the totalitarian ideology of Soviet communism, and the other by that of Western democratism. Soviet ideology vanished together with the Soviet Union, but the ideology of democratism, which gained new impetus after the Soviet empire's disintegration, not only survived, but began to grow in ambition.

The foreign policies that emerge from the ideology of democratism are quite simple. Western political ideologists believe that the best way to introduce the 'backward' nations of the world to the joys of freedom and democracy is to incorporate them into Western-dominated economic and political alliances. For this to happen, the target countries must have leaders who understand the benefits that membership will bring (that is, Western-leaning ones) and who will therefore work towards that end. If these leaders happen to fall short of democratic standards, this need not be a deal-breaker. Once they submit economically and politically, they will be pushed up to the required level with Western prodding.

This approach was on full display after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Exhilarated by their perceived victory, Western leaders saw no reason to show any regard for the interests of other countries, convinced as they were that governments would be lining up to align themselves with the West on the basis of its 'universal' values. In fact, most of the world rejected, and not without good reason, the bulk of these values as an ideological smokescreen for the West's attempts to impose its hegemony. Moreover, many of those values were at variance with the traditional cultures and religions prevalent in other major civilisations.

The West, in short, had overestimated its abilities, both politically and culturally. The world was more complex, and its values more diverse, than Western leaders – intoxicated by their success, but restricted by their ideology – had thought. At the same time, the attractiveness and objective possibilities of the West were dwindling due to the economic and political rise of non-Western powers, and to demographic trends. Yet Western capitals, especially Washington, continued to act as if history was on their side, using pressure, and often force, to assert their own vision of the world in countries – and, indeed, whole regions – that did not want to westernise. This policy produced chaos in Iraq and Ukraine; Western support for anti-government forces in Egypt and Syria was based on the same fallacy, with similar results.

Some Western observers eventually noticed this pattern. Council on Foreign Relations President Richard N. Haass, for example, has conceded that US actions have exacerbated global disorder. 'The post-Cold War order', he writes,

was premised on U.S. primacy, which was a function of not just U.S. power but also U.S. influence, reflecting a willingness on the part of others to accept the United States' lead. This influence has suffered from what is generally perceived as a series of failures or errors, including lax economic regulation that contributed to the financial crisis, overly aggressive national security policies that trampled international norms, and domestic administrative incompetence and political dysfunction ... The net result is that while the United States' absolute strength remains considerable, American influence has diminished.²

Henry Kissinger, meanwhile, has pointed to problems in the increasingly ideological character of American policies, though he uses a different term. 'The celebration of universal principles', he says, needs 'to be paired with recognition of the reality of other regions' histories, cultures and views of their security'. 'Vast regions of the world', he notes, 'have never shared and only acquiesced in the Western concept of order. These reservations are now becoming explicit, for example, in the Ukraine crisis and the South China Sea.'³

Europeans, too, have recently (some would say belatedly) begun to criticise triumphant policies. An essay issued by the European Council on Foreign Relations, for example, points out that the way of life promoted by the European Union as a model for the whole world actually represents an exception for that world:

The remaking of Europe took the shape of extending Western institutions, most of them created for a bipolar world ... Europeans were aware of the distinctive nature of their order but they were also convinced of its universal nature ... Intoxicated by its own innovations, the EU became increasingly disconnected from other powers – and saw only where others fell short of European standards rather than try to understand their different perspectives.⁴

Thus, even some Westerners have begun to perceive the growing gap between the West's ideological ambitions and its dwindling relative

capabilities. Faced with external challenges, including the rising influence of non-Western powers, and internal ones, such as changing demographics, many have begun to accept that the West is objectively losing its influence in the world. The rapid rise of China, along with the economic and political failures of many countries on which the United States and Europe had tried to impose their model of development (Russia in the 1990s, Iraq and Libya in this century) have raised questions about the universal effectiveness of favoured Western solutions such as democratisation, market economics and free trade. In addition, the West's imperious and often violent policies showed that the ideology of democratism was often being used to cover up attempts to establish political dominance. This understanding both seriously undermined the West's influence and, at the same time, contributed to the growing popularity of other models, notably the 'Beijing Consensus', as an alternative to the so-called 'Washington Consensus'.

Still, many in the West have failed to understand that the expansion of its model has reached its cultural and civilisational limits. The Western system was easily established (or restored) in Eastern Europe, where countries weary of Soviet control sought to join Western alliances for political and cultural reasons. But this model is far less palatable in North Africa and Eurasia. Both Islam and Orthodox Christianity, which are gaining popularity in the post-Soviet space, reject a wide range of Western cultural trends.

Something like this has happened before, in the context of the Soviet totalitarian project. Communist ideals, once popular around the world (particularly during anti-fascist and de-colonisation campaigns), lost their lustre when it became clear that, far from bringing prosperity, the Soviet model was only breeding dictatorships, corruption and stagnation in those Third World countries where it had been adopted. The deployment of Soviet troops to Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979 undermined Moscow's pretensions to build a better world, and heightened suspicions that Soviet ideology was little more than a smokescreen for geopolitical interests.

Yet geopolitical goals, no less in the Soviet Union than in the West, can hardly be separated from ideological ones. All totalitarian ideologists believe that their own political model guarantees prosperity and happiness,

and can effectively be realised with the 'brotherly help' of 'progressive' states (to use Soviet political jargon) – that is, under their political supervision. The goals of establishing political control over as many countries as possible, and bringing them happiness by imposing the only correct model of development, are inseparable in this political frame.

Thus, claims by Western commentators that Kosovo and Crimea cannot be compared come as no surprise. Within the framework of democratism, this is not a case of double standards. After all, Kosovo separated from Serbia, a backward, non-Western state, to join the world of freedom and progress. The Crimean case is different, because non-Western Russia is drawing it into the world of regress and dictatorship. It is a worldview that is completely in thrall to ideology, and hence impervious to logical argument.

It is unlikely, however, that this worldview will be able to withstand the changes currently under way within Western societies for much longer. What will the United States be like in 20 or 30 years, when a considerable part of its population is Spanish-speaking? In Britain, several cities have large Muslim populations, and in France, polls indicate that Muslims make up about 8–10% of the population.⁵ Will growing numbers of migrants provoke a reaction from right-wing traditionalists? Organisations such as Germany's Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) are already gaining popularity in many EU countries. It may be that Western countries will respond to the migration crisis by shutting down their borders or taking other radical steps, but this will signify serious backtracking on many of the postulates of democratism, as well as significant changes in foreign policy. In the foreseeable future, while democratism adapts to new realities, the West will hardly be a source of peace and stability. On the contrary, its policies will continue to produce global conflicts that will most often erupt in territories that border on other, non-Western powers with their own values.

Russia stands up

The year 2014 was a pivotal one for Russia's foreign policy. The crisis in Ukraine solidified Moscow's refusal to follow the West, leading to open confrontation. This marked a dramatic turn in the policies pursued by Moscow

since 1991. Although the period between 1991 and 2014 saw both close cooperation and disagreements with the West, Moscow had always made strategic concessions in the end. Today, concessions are highly unlikely. Instead, tactical arrangements are the best that can be hoped for, now that Russia has lost faith in the United States and Europe as political and economic partners. Moscow, having realised that it cannot establish friendly relations with Western countries without offering its complete political submission to them, has begun a real, not just rhetorical, political and economic turn to the non-Western world.

Why has this happened? The post-Soviet consensus between the West and Russia was based on at least a Russian understanding that both sides would move towards closer cooperation, respect each other's interests and make mutually acceptable compromises. Yet, only Russia followed this understanding in practical terms. While it never completely sacrificed its national interests, it nevertheless demonstrated its readiness to give some of them up for the sake of cooperation with the 'civilised world' (to use the common Russian phrase), which it wished to join. But the 'civilised world', despite its encouraging rhetoric, continued to view its relations with other countries in Cold War-era terms, sincerely regarding itself as the victor of that conflict. Having forgotten or ignored what Russians understood as promises – for example, not to expand NATO eastward – the West tried to make up for what it had failed to do during the Cold War because of Soviet resistance: it drew more and more countries into its orbit, and moved its military infrastructure closer to the Russian border, including onto the territory of Russia's historical allies. When an attempt was made to extend this policy to Russia's closest partner, Ukraine, by supporting a riot against a legitimate, democratically elected government, Russia could no longer tolerate this expansionism. It has now committed itself to taking whatever actions it can to resist it, subject to the limitations of its weak economy.

It should be noted that the new Russia has rejected Soviet, and any other, totalitarian ideology. It is not seeking to force its political model upon other countries. Moreover, despite its authoritarian character, this model has been proclaimed by Russian authorities as conforming to Western standards,

albeit with certain distinctive features deriving from Russia's cultural traditions. In Ukraine, as elsewhere, Russia is fighting not for the right to impose its version of the perfect society, but for purely geopolitical reasons, and, in effect, for its survival as a truly independent state. It simply wants to avoid being encircled and subjected to the political control of the United States and its allies, and for its neighbours to remain friendly, or at least neutral.

Speaking at a news conference on 18 December 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin attributed changes in the country's foreign policy not to the deteriorating relationship with the West but to global trends:

I often hear comments about Russia's turn towards the East. Now, if you read American analysts, they also write about the United States' turn towards the East. Is this true? Partly, yes. Why? Is this political? No. This stems from the global economic processes, because the East – that is, the Asia-Pacific Region – shows faster growth than the rest of the world. New opportunities open up. As for energy, the demand for resources is racing in leaps and bounds in China, India, as well as in Japan and South Korea. Everything is developing faster there than in other places. So should we turn down our chance? The projects we are working on were planned long ago, even before the most recent problems occurred in the global or Russian economy. We are simply implementing our long-time plans.⁶

By and large, this is true, but there is a diplomatic element as well. At any rate, political problems with the West clearly make Russia's turn towards the East more practicable, in the absence of viable alternatives.

Although the United States, and the West in general, view the conflict with Russia as a local one, they still regard it as dangerous in that Moscow's actions have undermined the West's global development project designed to gradually engage all countries on its own terms. It is local because Russia is not the most dangerous challenge on the horizon, though it may be the most acute for the time being. In fact, the West is much more worried about the prospects of a multipolar world emerging in the future. It has no idea how to westernise vast China, and things are not going quite as planned in India, Brazil and many other places either.

The China challenge

In the long term, a rising China will present a much bigger challenge to the Western ideology of global dominance than Russia, which remains weak. China, the world's second-largest economy and most densely populated country, poses a threat not because of its military capabilities, which still fall short of the United States' and even Russia's, but because communist China has succeeded where the Soviet Union failed: it has built an effective and attractive economy that is not based on the Western political model. This is threatening for the West because it raises doubts about its fundamental postulate that an economy can be effective and generate prosperity only if a country accepts the ideology of democratism. Moreover, the Chinese economy has become so interdependent with the American and European economies that it would be very difficult to deal with Beijing in the same way that Russia has been dealt with. The West depends on China economically just as much as China depends on the West. If a serious conflict were to break out, a united West might eventually prevail, but at unbearable cost to the global economy.

In keeping with its growing economic clout, China has begun to pursue a more vigorous foreign policy. Initially, it sought to convince its neighbours (and indeed the whole world) that its expanding power would not endanger their interests. This is the main message of the 'peaceful rise' concept put forth in 2003 during Hu Jintao's presidency. However, the word 'rise' caused concern, and was replaced with the concepts of 'peaceful development' and a 'harmonious world'.

Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has pushed ahead with ambitious plans to launch the Silk Road Economic Belt (which targets parts of Central Asia, the Near East and Russia) and Maritime Silk Road (Southeast and South Asia, and Oceania). While the economic aspects of these projects remain vague, their political meaning is clear: China hopes to build a common framework for the economic, and possibly political, future of at least parts of Asia based on its own development concepts, which offer an alternative to Western ones. Moreover, its concept of co-development is backed up by substantial material resources. The fact that, despite Washington's objections, several American allies have already joined the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank proposed by Beijing is a clear indication that Chinese projects are quite appealing.

Another sign of China's enhanced role in foreign affairs is the frequent calls to revisit the concept of *tao guang yang hui* (keep a low profile and bide your time) put forth by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s to help guide the country's foreign policy during a period of reform and openness.⁷ Igor Denisov, one of Russia's leading experts on Chinese foreign policy, comes to the conclusion that 'China's present-day political discourse clearly reveals both the continuity of foreign policy ... and attempts to make Chinese diplomacy more initiative-driven so that China could eventually become one of the states that set the rules of the game in accordance with their increased interests'.⁸ Although China's strategic planning continues to be restricted by the country's 'key interests', the range of these interests keeps expanding. Under Deng Xiaoping, these focused only on the issues of Taiwan and control over Tibet and Xinjiang. Today, however, they have been broadened to include the protection of China's positions in territorial disputes with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and in the conflict in the South China Sea. Some Chinese experts also insist that the country's key interests should include the need to secure a worthy place for China in the world more generally.

It is widely believed in China that the main obstacle to achieving this final goal is the United States. Many Chinese analysts insist that the US, as a global power that is losing influence but struggling to keep it, is trying to contain China as its main competitor. They believe that Washington is seeking, with the assistance of its allies and friendly states, to encircle China militarily and strategically, antagonise its neighbours and generally blow the 'Chinese threat' out of proportion. Military analyst Dai Xu, for instance, concludes in his book *C-Shaped Encirclement* that China has been encircled almost completely, except in Russia and Central Asia.⁹ Some experts have suggested taking action to break through this encirclement by, for example, building naval bases abroad or tasking the army with protecting Chinese entrepreneurs' investments in other countries.

The official Chinese position, however, is much milder. While the Chinese certainly consider the prevailing theory and practice of global

governance to be a Western scheme designed to protect US and European dominance around the world, Beijing does not wish to see it undermined or scrapped, but rather overhauled so that China and other non-Western states receive proper representation within it.¹⁰ This perspective can be seen in China's response to the idea of the 'Group of Two' put forward by Zbigniew Brzezinski in 2009.¹¹ Brzezinski's proposal was fully in line with the ideology of American dominance. It basically offered China the position of a junior US ally that would help solve American problems where Washington could not do so on its own, for example by assisting in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, helping the United States deal with the global economic crisis, getting directly involved in the dialogue with Iran, mediating in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, and even joining the Middle East settlement process. China would also be expected to pool efforts with the United States in addressing climate change; contribute to large UN peacekeeping forces for deployment to 'failed states'; and strengthen the non-proliferation regime by encouraging other countries to reject the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Beijing, for its part, politely rejected this idea, which would have required that it ignore a basic tenet of its own foreign policy barring interference in the internal affairs of other countries and regions. Instead, it made a counter-offer, inviting the United States to build a 'new type of relationship between major powers'. The idea was that China, rather than acting as Washington's agent in the world, would be seen as its equal partner, sharing the responsibility for addressing global problems on the basis of mutual advantage and compromise.¹²

It is clear, then, that China, like Russia, no longer desires to impose its model of development upon others. Instead, it seeks to occupy a place in the world that matches its new-found power and historical role, surrounded by peaceful and friendly states. That said, its economic interests extend far beyond its own territory. These aspirations, supported by the country's economic success, significant financial resources and unique model of modernisation without democracy (which is becoming increasingly popular among authoritarian leaders in developing countries), present a real challenge to Western democratism.

Despite this, many in the West hold that China, in accordance with popular theories of modernisation, is basically treading in the footsteps of Japan and the Asian Tigers, and that its economic modernisation should therefore be followed by democratisation, as in South Korea and Taiwan. The Chinese reply to this argument is that China is so much larger than these countries that it cannot be compared with any of them. According to this view, the country constitutes a separate civilisation, and will develop in its own way, using traditional Chinese recipes, not Western ones. Numerous publications have appeared in China to advance the view that traditional Chinese concepts of world order are more useful than Western approaches,¹³ and anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiment is stronger among the public than among the Chinese leadership. It is doubtful, therefore, that even a democratised China would look to the United States, or anyone else, for policy guidance, and certainly not at the cost of giving up its own interests.

*Tensions between
China and the
West will increase*

What about the predictions by some US experts, such as David Shambaugh,¹⁴ that communist China faces imminent collapse? Although this is most likely wishful thinking, at least for the foreseeable future, it is possible that economic problems could in the long term produce serious complications, or even a crisis, for the Chinese system. But as the experience of the Soviet Union and Russia shows, even the collapse of communism and a drawn-out crisis need not lead to the westernisation of such a large country as China, nor its submission to Western interests.

At any rate, on the current trajectory, tensions between China and the West will increase. This will not be because of differences in moral values, as in the case of Russia or other Eurasian countries. Western moral novelties are much more acceptable for the pragmatic Chinese, whose traditional culture rejects monotheistic religion. But Chinese culture is very different from Western culture in terms of social goals, and many Chinese cannot understand the West's eagerness to put the individual, and personal rights, above the public good and social justice. Nor is the Western ideal of a minimal state that expects citizens to take care of themselves widely accepted.

Instead, the highest value among most Chinese is a well-organised society that can guarantee the well-being of the majority. Differences like these will ensure that China remains distinct from the West, even as economic interdependence helps to curb tensions and to keep them from evolving into direct confrontation.

Other centres of power

In addition to Russia and China, India, Brazil and several other states are emerging as formidable, non-Western centres of power. India may be the world's most populous democracy, but it does not blindly follow the West. Like China, it pursues an independent foreign policy and tries to maintain constructive relations with all major global actors. Many Indian experts believe that their country's experience is a unique one: having existed for centuries as a multicultural and multi-confessional nation, it has preserved its civilisational unity based on respect for the views and traditions of other people. This experience, which has laid the foundation for Indian democracy, is one the country would like to share with the rest of the world, but in a peaceful way. India refuses to put pressure on other countries and never joins military actions initiated by the West, or even by broader global coalitions. At the same time, India is a key supplier of troops for UN peace-keeping forces.

Clearly, this ideal disagrees with the Western ideology of democratism. While sharing its respect for democracy, it rejects the idea of imposing 'progressive' ideals by force, and of handing out punishments for any deviations from them. And although India follows the West morally, it firmly adheres to its own traditions. The government that came to power in 2014, led by Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, has only amplified traditionalist tendencies inside the country.

This is not to say that India has no difficulties in its relations with other countries. New Delhi would like to improve relations with China due to economic imperatives, but serious problems in bilateral relations remain, and the two countries are still locked in a territorial dispute. In addition, their interests have begun to clash over several island states that previously were within India's sphere of influence, but which are now a target of

Beijing's economic expansion (the Maldives, the Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka).

In 2014, Brazil was the world's seventh-largest economy, with a GDP exceeding that of Italy and Russia. Politically, it displays strong left-wing tendencies, a typical response among Latin American countries to historical US attempts at domination and the main reason for growing disagreements with the United States. Brazil's foreign policy in many ways counteracts America's: the country did not support the US-led operations in Iraq and Libya; it advocates a peaceful settlement in Syria; and it has opposed the imposition of sanctions against Iran. In 2010, Brazil and Turkey signed a joint declaration with Iran, whereby Tehran pledged to send a portion of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for enriched fuel for its research reactor. The agreement was criticised by the United States and its European allies.

On the economic front, Brazil refused to support the American project of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA), which was one of the main reasons for its failure. The United States often criticises Brazil for protectionism and alleged dumping practices, as well as violations of intellectual property rights, to which Brazil responds by blaming Washington for pursuing a 'monetarist' policy and provoking 'currency wars' against emerging markets. As the Brazilian centre of power grows stronger and gains more influence in Latin America (and the world more generally), disagreements with the United States will increase. As in the cases of India and China, however, economic considerations will not allow these to develop into fierce hostility.

Brazil, along with Russia, India, China and South Africa, is a member of the BRICS group of countries, one of many examples of the kind of cooperative relationships that have emerged among countries which have found themselves dissatisfied, for various reasons, with the Western-dominated, post-Cold War regime. The BRICS group, although not a formal organisation, has been important, firstly because it brings together the largest and most influential non-Western countries, and secondly because, unlike some regional groupings, it claims to represent the entire 'South' – or, more broadly, the entire non-Western world. Thirdly, BRICS actively puts

forward its own initiatives as an alternative to Western projects for organising the global economic and political order.

It is clear from an examination of BRICS's evolution that the basis for cooperation among its members has been primarily geopolitical in nature, not economic. The group, which today comprises countries that can be seen as natural leaders within their regions, took its current form by stages. Its source can be traced to two decades of Sino-Russian rapprochement based on shared geopolitical interests. Later, India was added to the equation with the emergence of the RIC (Russia–India–China) model of cooperation. RIC became BRIC with the inclusion of Brazil. (Formally, RIC still exists, but it became passive after the emergence of BRIC.) The final step was to add South Africa.

BRICS has gained geopolitical significance by offering its own views on world affairs. One of the main topics it addresses is the need to reform the global economy. The BRICS member states have been forceful advocates for increasing the representation of non-Western countries in international financial institutions, despite resistance from the traditional masters of global finance. When the group failed in its attempt to reform the World Bank and the IMF along more equitable lines, it was inspired to create its own development bank and pool of currency reserves. These institutions may not offer a comprehensive alternative to existing international financial institutions, but they should help correct the Western bias of these institutions and provide non-Western states with an alternative when choosing a partner for their financial development and in the event of a serious economic crisis.

While the reform of the global financial system has been identified as the most important of what Vadim Lukov, ambassador-at-large of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russia's BRICS sous-sherpa, sees as the group's four strategic interests, he considers the other three as strengthening the central role of the UN Security Council in the international system, making maximum use of the complementary nature of the member states' economies in order to accelerate economic development, and modernising the social sphere and economic life of those countries.¹⁵ These goals clearly extend beyond the purely economic realm. Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis

has been highly significant for BRICS, as it has shown that the West remains determined to build a unipolar world order, pulling an ever greater number of satellites into its foreign-policy orbit and demanding conformity, in both their foreign and domestic policies, with what the West calls 'international' and even 'universal' standards. Many states in the non-Western world view this approach as a new wave of colonialism that substitutes the ideological slogan of 'democracy' for 'more advanced culture', but that retains the same methods and goals. Of course, such circumstances will only increase the desire of the non-Western world to increase its mutual coordination.

For its part, Russia has a strong interest in cooperation within the BRICS framework, not just because Moscow is seeking support in its current confrontation with the West, but because the complete breakdown of mutual trust that has accompanied the crisis has accelerated the Russian pivot towards the non-Western world, which had begun even before the conflict broke out. Given the sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia, Asian and South American states are poised to gradually replace Europe as the principal exporters of many goods, especially food and agricultural products. Russia's hydrocarbon exports, meanwhile, are gradually moving in the direction of China and other parts of the Asia-Pacific. Members of Russia's political elite are beginning to understand that they cannot achieve the strategic goal of developing Siberia and the Far East without cooperating with their neighbours in Asia. Europe and the United States, on the other hand, are starting to be seen as unreliable partners that are prepared to sacrifice economic ties for the sake of political pressure at any moment. Thus, not only ideology, but also objective circumstances and economic interests, are compelling Russia to shift its attention to other regions.

* * *

Russia's refusal to follow the Western course is only the first sign of conflict between the West's united-world project and an emerging multipolar system. In a multipolar world, the influence of the West will diminish, while that of other centres of power (China, India, Brazil) will grow as they seek to build zones of influence around their borders. This policy will be fiercely

resisted by the West, as is now the case with Russia and China. Weaker, non-Western centres of power (such as the BRICS member states) will try to coordinate their actions against the more powerful centres, but this does not mean they will aspire to create an anti-Western alliance. Indeed, it is possible that conflicts may emerge between non-Western powers if their zones of influence collide (as between China and India, for example). The West, and especially the United States, may use such struggles to further its own interests. At the same time, medium-sized or regional powers with goals and interests of their own, such as Vietnam, South Africa, Nigeria and Venezuela, may form temporary alliances with larger powers to achieve certain local goals (as Vietnam is now doing in attempting to use the United States in its territorial conflict with China).

All this is not to say that the post-bipolar world will be completely divided into big and small centres of power. It will still face the same, if not even more, acute global problems that can only be solved jointly: a shortage of resources, overpopulation, pollution, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, and others. In addition, the rise of Islamism, and the terrorism it can breed, cannot be traced to any one state, but rather represents another totalitarian ideology that wields influence over those inclined to reject, in radical fashion, the 'immorality' and 'sinfulness' of the modern world. This is one of the reasons why young Muslims living in Western countries, where the discrepancy between their beliefs and Western civilisation is thrown into sharpest relief, often become radical Islamists.¹⁶

The resolution of these problems will require a mechanism for interaction, which can be created if the main centres of power reach a consensus on those limited areas where their views converge, and agree to disagree on all other issues, while avoiding overt confrontation. This will mean, in essence, reviving the notion of 'peaceful coexistence' that was part of the bipolar world, according to which the great powers, while not sharing global-development goals or social-system ideals, refused to wage wars against each other, and tried to come to agreement where possible. Existing institutions of global governance, such as the UN and its Security Council, would be the best choice to serve as the working bodies of this mechanism,

simply because there is no alternative. But this does not mean that this system should not change. On the contrary, it should be gradually reformed by mutual consent to ensure more adequate representation for emerging powers. The only alternative to this would be an unpredictable world with no rules and hence constant conflict.

The role of Russia in this transitional world is only just beginning to take shape. The country is working to become a major independent centre of power and is positioning itself as the linchpin of Eurasian integration. Whether it has enough resources to sustain this project is unclear. What is clear is that Russia cannot afford an open-ended confrontation with other powers because of its heavy economic dependence on the West. It would be much more prudent to position Russia and the Eurasian Union as part of Greater Europe, while reinforcing the distinction between this and the European Union. This would be a more realistic goal, and one that most segments of Russian society would find acceptable (only the advocates of extreme pro-Western and nationalistic views would be excluded). At the same time, this policy would win the support of those within Europe who oppose US dominance and favour a more independent course, while allowing Russia to continue its economic cooperation with Europe. Moreover, Moscow should revive its role as a kind of bridge between Europe and Eurasia, allowing for the transmission of certain European political standards to Eurasia while also making clear to Europeans that Eurasian countries, including Russia, have their own traditions, and will not accept the wholesale imposition of Western values where these contradict their own moral principles.

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Notes

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