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DMITRY EFREMENKO. CONSOLIDATION OF THE WORLD MAJORITY: EXPANSION OF THE SCO AND BRICS, ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

Keywords: World Majority; Global South; Shanghai Cooperation Organization; BRICS; crisis of the unipolar world order; Near and Middle East; soft balancing; transformation of the world economy.

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Abstract. The expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS in 2023 is analyzed in the context of the processes of transformation of the world order, as well as political turbulence in the Near and Middle East region. Iran's accession to the SCO and BRICS not only indicates that this country has overcome international isolation, but also serves as confirmation of the growth of its geopolitical significance. Iran is one of the parties to the new configuration of international actors, while its other participants are China and Russia. The Russia-China-Iran triangle is a group whose members are united by an understanding of common threats, which they seek to mitigate through "soft balancing" of the policy of the hegemonic superpower. For the SCO, the full integration of Iran, on the one hand, again emphasizes that ensuring the security of Central Asia and stabilizing Afghanistan remain a priority, but, on the other hand, encourages this organization to focus its attention on conflicts in the Near and Middle East region. The BRICS group is also focusing on this region, with four of its five new members located in the Near and Middle East. But beyond geopolitics, the expansion of BRICS forms a "personal union" of this group with the leading members of OPEC. The extensive growth of BRICS, with all the risks of complicating decision-making processes, contributes to the expansion and consolidation of various network interactions of non-Western international actors. In the current international political conditions, this feature gives BRICS advantages over "rigid" alliances with detailed regulation of formal obligations and a system of informal obligations "built into" their architecture, reflecting hierarchical interactions within blocs.

The coronavirus pandemic and related global socio-economic problems, the special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine that began in February 2022, and the war between Israel and HAMAS that broke out in October 2023 demonstrated the profound ineffectiveness of the unipolar world order both in terms of economic performance and in regard of ensuring international and regional security. Under these conditions, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and other non-Western structures, institutions and forums of international cooperation continued to form an alternative to the system of global

governance based on the hegemony of one superpower. A striking external manifestation of the ongoing changes was the expansion of the number of SCO and BRICS participants in the summer of 2023. Along with recording the general transformations of the world order, the expansion of the SCO and BRICS also indicates significant reconfigurations of forces in several regions of the planet, especially in the Near and Middle East, Central Asia, as well as Africa. When considering this entire range of issues, it is important to take into account the resonance effect of the expansion of the SCO and BRICS with the events of the second half of 2023, in particular, with the failure of the Ukrainian "counter-offensive", the victory of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict, the collapse of Paris' dominance in the former colonies in Western and Central Africa, the HAMAS terrorist attack on Israel and the start of a military operation in the Gaza Strip.

Expansion of the SCO in 2023 and the Growing Geopolitical Gravity of Iran

The SCO summit in July 2023 was marked by the admission of Iran to the organization as a full participant. This event means that the SCO is becoming an important player in the Middle East region. For Iran itself, full membership in the SCO is yet another confirmation of overcoming international isolation and recognition of the growing role of this country in the system of international interactions of Greater Eurasia. Together with the decision to admit Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia as full members of BRICS, the expansion of the SCO can be seen as another symptom of the sharply accelerated transformation of the world order and the desire of most countries in the world to overcome the deeply unfair system of the American hegemony, which provided one country with unfair and unilateral advantages. But, in addition to the general global context, the two expansions reflect significant changes in the balance of power and interactions of players at

different levels in a region of the planet that is extremely important for world politics and geo-economics.

Speaking about the expansion of the SCO and BRICS, it should be noted that this became possible thanks, firstly, to the major peacemaking success of Chinese diplomacy, which made a major contribution to the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Beijing was able to achieve this result due to the fact that it was in China that both countries saw a strong and impartial mediator interested in stabilizing the situation in the Near and Middle East. The US in the modern world can no longer claim this role. Washington's last major achievement as a mediator in the Near and Middle East – the so-called Abraham Accords – had an anti-Iranian lining, that is, they deliberately excluded a position of impartiality in relation to all major actors in regional politics.

Secondly, Russia made a significant contribution to changing the situation in the Near and Middle East by intervening in the Syrian conflict in 2015. A smart combination of hard power projection and skillful diplomacy allowed Moscow to strengthen relations with leading regional players, or at least build a new configuration of mutual interests in relations with them, despite the fact that these players themselves compete fiercely and sometimes openly quarrel with each other. The assistance of Russia and China allowed the states of the Near and Middle East to quickly get used to the new situation of multipolarity and begin to derive a number of advantages from it.

The basis of Russia's strategically oriented relations with Iran was the de facto alliance in the Syrian conflict, which began with the successful efforts of the Iranian side in 2015 to convince Russia to intervene in the conflict, as well as unity on a negative basis, due to the strong sanctions pressure from the West and especially the efforts of the US aimed at undermining the security of both Russia and Iran. In the case of the latter, the inability and unwillingness of the Biden administration to return to the nuclear deal, choosing instead a policy of increasing pressure on the

leadership in Tehran to the point of efforts aimed at destabilizing the Iranian regime was of particular importance. In the conditions of the SMO, Iran has become a very valuable and important partner for Russia. In particular, the “alleged” deliveries of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles played a significant role in the hostilities in Ukraine, although, apparently, the matter was not limited to just these deliveries.

The military-political efforts of Iran, which secured its status as one of the most powerful powers in the Near and Middle East, were of utmost importance for changing the regional balance of power. In addition to its dominance in the political life of Lebanon (primarily thanks to the Hezbollah movement), strong but shared with Moscow influence on the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus, and a stable presence in Iraq (even despite difficulties with a number of Shiite groups), Tehran quite successfully intervened in processes on the Arabian Peninsula, especially in the Yemen conflict. The Iranian-backed Houthis have successfully resisted the Saudi-led military coalition, effectively using new means of warfare such as UAVs. The success of the Houthis was one of the most important factors that forced Riyadh to negotiate with Tehran through Chinese mediation. Finally, as the war between Israel and HAMAS progressed, the Houthis began to exert increasing influence on the conflict, which by the end of 2023 led to a near-total shutdown of supplies to Israel through the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, forcing the US and a number of other states announced the launch of Guardian of Prosperity Operation, aimed at countering “threats to maritime trade” from Yemen’s Shia-Zaydis.

Thus, throughout the 2010s – early the 2020s, Iran not only remained an integral part of the complex equation characterizing the regional balance of power, but managed to strengthen its influence to such an extent that it acted as a party to fairly stable configurations of major international actors [1]. One of these configurations, the Russia-India-China triangle, or the “Primakov’s

triangle" [2], became the basis for the formation of BRIC (later BRICS) and the expansion of the SCO in 2017. The Russia-Türkiye-Iran triangle acted as a moderator of the Syrian conflict, allowing us to find a balance of interests that contributed to the exit from the most dangerous and bloody stages of the conflict, as well as the relative marginalization of the role of the US and the West in it. Iran's accession to the SCO can be seen as an indicator of the influence of another configuration of players consisting of Russia, China and Iran. The force that unites this triangle is, first of all, hostility on the part of the US, but at the same time, the growing interaction within the triangle is gradually filled with positive political and economic content [3].

The Russia-China-Iran triangle is not a group whose members are bound by any strict obligations of joint action in relation to a superpower pursuing a hegemonic policy. However, an understanding of the common threats emanating from the US encourages the participants in this triangle to coordinate interaction in such a way as to block the hegemon's policies through "soft balancing" [4] without the costs of direct confrontation with it. Soft balancing uses non-military instruments such as international institutions, trade and economic cooperation, and diplomatic agreements to counter the pressure of a hegemonic power [5]. Taking into account the interaction during the SMO (in particular, between Russia and Iran), we can say that the "soft balancing" toolkit also includes military-technical cooperation, carried out to the extent that it does not cross Washington's "red lines". Geo-economic and geo-strategic aspects should also be taken into account, since it is on the territory of Iran that the main vectors of trade and infrastructure development projects of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the international North-South transport corridor, the end points of which are located in Russia and India, intersect.

For India, the transit potential of Iran (in addition to the route to Russia, communications to Central Asia can pass through Iran), its role in the supply of hydrocarbons and the

generally constructive direction of cooperation between the two countries served as weighty arguments in favor of supporting Tehran's accession to the SCO family. Indian leaders appear to recognize that China's strong economic presence in Iran does not mean a zero-sum game for New Delhi. Iran appears to have a special place in India's geostrategy, something that both Moscow and Beijing should take into account. The need for such consideration reveals the ambiguity of interactions between international players participating in several "triangular" configurations at once.

Iran's entry into the SCO means that Afghanistan becomes a territory surrounded on almost all sides by states participating in this association. Thus, Afghanistan becomes a clear and permanent priority for the SCO. Here, first of all, what is important is a high level of mutual understanding between the SCO countries on the issues of combating Islamic terrorist and extremist groups, primarily ISIS. The Taliban government in Kabul also recognizes that the "three evil forces" pose an immediate threat to the stability and secure future of Afghanistan. In general, we can talk about a number of achievements of the Taliban government after the flight of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. The Taliban largely control the country; they demonstrate sufficient effectiveness in the fight against drug production and drug trafficking. Thus, there are grounds for strengthening interaction between the SCO countries and the new Afghan authorities both in the areas of security and in the areas of economic cooperation. Next in line is the start of the implementation of infrastructure projects necessary both for Afghanistan itself and for ensuring a higher level of transport and economic connectivity between the SCO countries. Afghanistan can play a very important role in the development of energy projects.

Politically, the government in Kabul obviously supports the international approaches of China, Russia and other SCO member countries, and at the same time, mindful of the

consequences of a long American presence in the country, demonstrates rejection of the hegemonic course of the US and the collective West. At the moment, China, Russia and Iran are increasing the level of interaction with the Afghan authorities. At the same time, they, as well as other SCO states, exert influence that encourages the Taliban regime to take greater account of the interests of Afghanistan's ethnic minorities and women's rights. Ultimately, progress in this direction will make it possible to achieve a higher level of international legitimacy for the Afghan government, including discussion of the possibilities of full integration of this country into the SCO. In turn, the security, stability and economic recovery of Afghanistan should be considered as the primary and long-term responsibility of the SCO member countries.

Problems and Prospects for the Development of the SCO and Other non-Western Institutions

The expansion of any international organization where decisions are made on the basis of consensus means a certain complication of the process of political agreements and, in some cases, limits the efficiency and effectiveness of decision-making. The SCO is no exception in this case. India's SCO presidency in 2023 was nevertheless quite effective. The fact that the Final Declaration of the New Delhi summit included a mention that the SCO is not opposed to any country or group of countries cannot be considered as India's exclusive merit or initiative. Even in its narrower composition, in the first years of its existence, the SCO was not an anti-Western alliance. However, the Shanghai Organization was and remains a non-Western international political institution offering an alternative path to the countries and peoples of the Global South.

In a sense, India's achievements in recent years in terms of rapprochement with the US, Japan and other countries of the Western camp were facilitated by the fact that India had

previously strengthened its authority as one of the leading non-Western countries – a co-founder of BRICS and a member of the SCO since 2017. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid a possible weakening of the unity of the SCO due to the influence that the US is trying to exert on India or the countries of Central Asia. In particular, Washington's efforts to transform the QUAD grouping, which includes India, into an anti-Chinese alliance are a serious risk factor. The announcement of the start of work on the formation of a transport corridor linking India and the European Union through the countries of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula was presented as creating a counterweight to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. True, the war between Israel and HAMAS and its long-term consequences will most likely lead to the blocking of this project, while the alternative North-South transport corridor will continue to develop.

The US and EU countries are also putting significant pressure on India so that it joins the Western sanctions regimes directed against Russia, or at least reduces military-technical cooperation and energy trade, compliance with the "price ceiling" illegitimately established by the West for Russian oil. Similar pressure is being exerted by the West on the countries of Central Asia through threats of imposing secondary sanctions and curtailing assistance programs, which, however, is not comparable to the level of support provided to the economies of the Central Asian countries by Russia and China. In this regard, it should be noted the value of the SCO consultation mechanisms, which allow member countries to discuss complex problems and relieve tensions caused by the actions of other states that consider the SCO as a competitor.

The SCO represents one of the key elements of the emerging cooperation networks of the non-Western world, or the World Majority [6]. Of great importance is the connection of the SCO with other non-Western structures and initiatives, such as BRICS, the Belt and Road, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), etc. In this network

mega-format, it is important to strive for a more effective division of labor between the elements, and also, if necessary, supplement it with new structures. For example, within the SCO it is quite difficult to achieve coordination of the macroeconomic policies of the participating countries. But this problem can be solved in the format of interaction between China and the EAEU countries. The development of steps aimed at further liberalizing the conditions of trade and investment cooperation can be seen as specific tasks that are still difficult to solve with the full membership of all SCO participants, but it is quite possible to achieve tangible progress as part of China, Iran and the EAEU countries (including Belarus). At the same time, China, Russia, as well as Iran could coordinately prevent Western attempts to undermine economic cooperation in Central Asia, in particular, through the use of primary and secondary sanctions and putting pressure on the political and economic elites of the countries of this region. Also urgent is the convergence of technological standards, the creation of common mechanisms for stimulating and regulating the development of new technologies, and the prevention of external interference aimed at blocking the technological development of China and the EAEU countries. It is important to keep these cooperation formats open, allowing them to be extended to other SCO member countries as soon as they are ready.

With its full complement the SCO is entirely justified to work out further steps related to the comprehensive development of energy, overcoming energy shortages, which is an acute problem for Central Asia, Pakistan, India, developing new routes for energy supplies, linking various energy sources (hydrocarbons, nuclear power, water resources and renewable energy sources) into a single technological and economic system, as well as the formation of coordinated and socially realistic approaches to combating climate change. The significance of the latter was confirmed by the decision of the summit in New Delhi to declare 2024 the SCO Year of Ecology.

Arabian Monarchies and the Resonance Effect between BRICS and OPEC

The challenges of energy markets and the interests of key international actors in these markets played a very important role in the selection of specific countries that received invitations to join BRICS. In its expanded composition, BRICS will include leading hydrocarbon producers and their consumers (outside the West). There is partial interference between BRICS and OPEC, which can rightfully be called the most influential organization that united in the 20th century a number of oil-rich non-Western countries. As a result, the enlarged BRICS group will control 43 percent of global oil production; the addition of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates alone adds more than 1.5 trillion dollars to the total GDP of the BRICS countries. With the fragmentation of the once united global hydrocarbon market sharply accelerated as a result of Western sanctions against Iran and Russia and attempts by oil consumers to set price ceilings for individual producers, the two Arabian monarchies have made a fundamental political choice that will further deepen this split. Even earlier, the KSA made a major contribution to undermining the position of the petrodollar by deciding to trade oil with China for yuan.

Apparently, the seizure by the West of a significant part of Russia's foreign assets and gold and foreign exchange reserves made a particularly strong impression on the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Prince Muhammad bin Salman is well aware of the lack of guarantees that such an operation will never be applied to Saudi assets. In this case, the role of the subjective factor in world politics should not be underestimated. Perhaps if the de facto leader of the KSA were another member of the Saudi dynasty, changes in relations with the West, rapprochement with China and constructive cooperation with Russia would have proceeded at a much slower pace. But here we are talking about a

very ambitious person who, obviously, is not inclined to forgive the insults once inflicted on him. This can be seen in how the US President Joe Biden was received in Riyadh (July 2022) and how the leaders of China (December 2022) and Russia (December 2023) were received. Of course, Prince Muhammad's policy is quite pragmatic and we are by no means talking about Saudi Arabia moving into the anti-Western camp. But, and this is no less important, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Prince Muhammad, is moving towards becoming one of the important players in the multipolar world, with a significantly higher level of strategic autonomy than before.

The former pro-American orientation of the Arabian monarchies is becoming a thing of the past. Taking a position close to neutral in the Ukrainian conflict, they pose another challenge to Washington. The Biden administration is increasing pressure on the Arabian monarchies, but, obviously, this activity is overdue and the leading Gulf countries have made a fundamental choice in favor of further diversification of ties in the areas of trade and security.

Since the beginning of the SMO, Russia's relations with the Arabian monarchies have strengthened significantly, the importance of trade and economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and especially the UAE has increased sharply due to the harsh sanctions policy of the West towards Moscow. Of course, relations in the OPEC+ format come first here. The Gulf countries undoubtedly benefited greatly from the dynamics of energy prices after the start of the SMO, as well as from the redistribution of supply channels and the forced sharp reduction in Russia's presence in European markets. True, cheap Russian oil has greatly pushed Arab oil out of the markets in China and India. The redrawing of gas markets will have even more controversial consequences, which may, in particular, resonate with previously existing interstate contradictions.

The choice of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in favor of BRICS is also due to the awareness of the long-term risks associated with

the economic decarbonization strategy promoted by the West, which will be focused not only on solving climate problems, but also on securitization and achieving geopolitical and geo-economic advantages. The global “green transition” will be accompanied by serious technological challenges, and the Arabian monarchies will strive to avoid new technological dependence on the West. Membership in BRICS will allow them to strengthen their positions at a time when technological and regulatory tools will be used even more actively by the West.

For the BRICS countries in the framework of five, expansion at the expense of the Arabian monarchies and Iran was a very serious geopolitical and geo-economic stake. As a result, a unified BRICS / OPEC system will not emerge in 2024, but both groups will mutually reinforce each other. Instead of unpromising attempts to form a hierarchical system of alliances alternative to the West, there is an expansion and consolidation of various network interactions of non-Western international players.

Of course, the factor of civilizational representation is also very important. The absence of countries from the Moslem world among the BRICS members has long been the Achilles heel of this group. Starting from 2024, four Moslem countries, both Sunni and Shia, will be represented in BRICS. Their geographic localization will focus special attention of BRICS on the regions of the Near and Middle East, North Africa, and also (taking into account the predominantly non-Moslem Ethiopia) the Horn of Africa.

Development of events in the Middle East after the 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg will inevitably strengthen the criticism of the group members and the World Majority as a whole regarding Western policies that remain openly pro-Israel in the context of the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip that is worsening with every passing day. In fact, we are talking about the complete self-discreditation of the entire Western system of moral and ethical arguments, demanding that the countries of the Global South condemn Russia's actions in the

course of the SMO and join the sanctions regimes. The new regional geopolitical structure, the foundation of which was to be the Abraham Accords, turned out to be practically frozen by the end of 2023. And although the leading BRICS countries are not able to stop Israel's military operation in Gaza, their possible actions in connection with the consequences of this operation may be very sensitive for the US and the EU.

Is the BRICS Glass Half Empty?

The reaction of Western and pro-Western political analysts to the expansion of the SCO and BRICS ranges from alarmism to hopes that the formats for uniting the powers of the World Majority will turn out to be short-lived and ineffective due to growing contradictions between their participants.

Daron Acemoglu, viewing the expansion of BRICS through a synocentric lens, believes that it automatically leads to increased Chinese (and, incidentally, Russian) influence, since all BRICS recruits already have quite friendly relations with Beijing and Moscow. Moreover, according to Acemoglu, the nature of the regimes in Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Ethiopia contributes to a much faster transformation of the entire group into an "anti-democratic club," which ultimately indicates a reduction in the area of democracy on a global scale. In turn, support from Beijing, in particular, the unhindered transfer of Chinese video surveillance technologies, acts as a factor in strengthening these regimes [7]. However, references to the role of artificial intelligence technologies in supporting authoritarianism are apparently related to fears of further strengthening of the technological influence of the PRC and the acceptance by non-Western countries of Chinese regulatory regimes, leading to the undermining of the universal nature of political decisions of Western countries in the field of AI. In any case, all the new BRICS members are already participants in the

Belt and Road Initiative, and China is their largest or one of the main trading partners [8].

The vulnerability of Acemoglu's argumentation is due to the fact that all new members of BRICS, with the exception of Iran, have quite constructive relations with the US. Moreover, it is the US (especially under the administration of Joe Biden) that is trying to carry out black and white division of all other countries into democracy and non-democracy. Both the declared and actual position of BRICS consists in non-interference in the internal affairs of each other and indifference regarding the government systems in any of the countries included in this club. The motives that encourage the leading non-Western countries to participate in BRICS are connected, first of all, with the strengthening of their sovereignty and international subjectness, while an attempt to impose from outside the differentiation according to the criteria Freedom House can only undermine these general aspirations.

Acemoglu does not conceal his hopes for the internal weakening of BRICS, considering as an ideal development option the formation within the group of a peculiar counterbalance to both the China-Russia axis and the dominance of the US. It is worth noting that the very idea of a "democratic alternative" inside BRICS clearly highlights the growing dysfunctionality of American leadership, the direct support of which in the global South is already almost "not in trade" (Argentina under Javier Milei is an exception, obviously, of the temporary anomaly nature). According to Acemoglu, the composition of the countries that replenished the ranks of the BRICS means that the chances of forming a counterbalance to Russia and China among the participants of the BRICS are missed at the present moment, but in the future it seems possible to form a separate "democratic" block from developing economies (Indonesia, Türkiye, Mexico, Colombia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Kenya), which then could "pull" India, Brazil and South Africa to their side.

Another assessment of BRICS expansion, less alarming for the West, is offered by C. Raja Mohan, in the past, the first

director of Carnegie India. He criticizes on reasonable basis the miscalculations of the Western expert community: "mixing their hopes and fears about the global order with analysis, Western commentators demonstrate complete ignorance in relation to the countries of the global south, their various interests and their interactions with the great powers" [9]. At the same time, Raja Mohan states that BRICS is not a military or political bloc, and its accession to the group of new participants will further reduce the space of possible consensus. It is assumed that the addition of the contradictions within the main axis of the BRICS related to the border conflict of China and India, the new zones of tension (Iran / Saudi Arabia, Egypt / Ethiopia) will still more undermine the vitality of the group. The West may be sure that BRICS does not transform into an anti-Western alliance, since there is a sufficient number of "friends" of the US and the European Union. The most powerful of these powers – India – "balances" its participation in BRICS by participation in the format of Quad, as well as in forum I2U2 (India, Israel, the UAE, and the US). According to Raja Mohan, in the future, rivalry inside BRICS can be more acute than the contradictions of most of its member countries with the US. The West needs to get out of strategic hibernation, use the contradictions inside BRICS and find new ways to attract the global south to its side, which, supposedly, is only waiting for this.

This very common line of argumentation – it can be called "a glass of BRICS is half empty" – proves to be very vulnerable in a more detailed analysis. If BRICS group was a military-political unit like NATO or an institutionalized political and economic union like the EU, the Indian-Chinese contradictions would quickly bring it to a critical decline in effectiveness. In the absence of an institutional basis, in principle, it is not too clear what exactly can fall a victim of contradictions between the participants of BRICS. Where there is a stable zone of common interests, a problem-oriented institutional structure can arise following the declarations of leaders (the creation of the New Development Bank can be an example), but so far, such

derivatives of BRICS do not form a holistic architecture of institutions at the level of the entire group. In relevant international political conditions, this feature gives BRICS advantages over “stiff” unions with detailed regulation of formal obligations and a system of obligations of non-formal obligations that reflect hierarchical interaction within the blocks, “built-in” into their architecture. We can say that the idea of “the strength of weak ties” [10] is quite in demand here, if you try to transfer it from the field of social communications to the interstate communications area.

The BRICS group, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, never acted as Western antagonists, although it is the West that antagonizes the two key participants in BRICS and SCO. At the same time, the identity of SCO and BRICS emphasizes the otherness in relation to the West and the desire to restore global justice precisely by strengthening the positions of the world majority. In the logic of the zero sum game, characteristic of Western political elites, this is more than enough for concern.

Possible Transition from Geo-Economic Fragmentation to a New Globalization and Strengthening of the World Majority

In a broad geo-economic context, the new opportunities associated with the expansion of BRICS provide serious additional grounds for discussing the problems of economic fragmentation and the prospects for a new globalization. There is no doubt that the crisis of the economic globalization model of the 1990s and early 2000s was largely rooted within an unbalanced geo-economic system aimed at preserving the dominance and unfair preferences of Western countries. This was confirmed by both the Great Recession of 2008 and the global shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the decisive acceleration of the deglobalization processes was given by the

motives of geopolitical competition, primarily between the US and China [11], and in the last two years, by the actions of the parties within the framework of the proxy war that broke out on the territory of Ukraine between Russia and the West. Securitization is becoming the main driver of reformatting cross-border flows of services, capital and investments, breaking off previously existing ones and forming new supply chains and added value. Unprecedented sanctions, the arrest by the West of part of the foreign exchange reserves and other assets of the Russian Federation, and the beginning of attempts to illegally manage them led to widespread awareness of the fundamental political risks of the global financial system based on US dollar. In addition, the increasing crisis potential of the international monetary and financial system is caused not only by external geopolitical shocks, but also by its internal instability, producing global imbalances [12]. The fears expressed by many economic experts, in particular, the First Deputy Managing Director of the IMF Gita Gopinath, about the danger of losing the main achievements of “almost three decades of peace, integration and growth” seem well founded [13].

In this context, one of the most pressing issues of global development is the formation of a new financial architecture. BRICS, SCO and other non-Western structures can significantly facilitate and speed up payments between countries in national currencies (for now, payments in Chinese yuan are the most convenient), and then consistently solve the problem of creating an alternative international currency unit that uses all the advantages of digital money and, unlike dollar and euro, secured by real resource assets of the issuing countries. Non-Western international structures also need to form an effective system of scientific and technological cooperation that excludes dictates from the West in the field of high technologies.

Although the scenario of creating a common currency of the BRICS countries in the near future is one of the most unlikely (something can be quickly changed here only by a massive attack

of “black swans” on the global economy), more modest steps, which include progress in the formation of the payment system BRICS Pay, as part of the development of a common platform for payments and transfers using blockchain technologies, have important policy implications. By making a significant contribution to the process of de-dollarization, this project should help increase the popularity and compatibility of national payment systems [14]. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the advantage of such payment systems, as well as digital currencies issued by the Central banks of non-Western countries, is not only the avoidance of the political dictates of the dollar issuer, but also the technological advance compared to the SWIFT system [15].

It is very significant that the IMF, in assessing the likely contours of a new geo-economic fragmentation, used extremely politicized data – information about the vote in 2022 at the UN General Assembly on resolutions on Ukraine. In fact, we are not talking about a picture of the global economy that corresponds to the mainstream ideas about regionalism, but about purely geopolitical dividing lines. The formation of trade and economic blocs in such a configuration could, according to Gita Gopinath, lead to a reduction in global GDP by 2.5-7 percent with the greatest losses for the least developed countries. Given that this expert voice is heard from the citadel of one of the most important institutions of the Washington Consensus, the US and the West would do well to once again assess the full consequences of the geopolitical tensions they are provoking.

It appears that the noted trends generally correspond to the scenario of transition to dual global circulation [16], the essence of which is the emergence of two relatively autonomous zones of circulation of resources, goods, services, technologies and capital. China will be at the center of one, the US at the center of the other, and interaction between them will occur to a lesser extent directly and to an increasing extent – with the help of connecting links – interconnectors, which can be represented by state and

non-state economic actors, as well as supranational integration associations. Membership in BRICS, as well as participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, provides the most comfortable access to Chinese economic power [17]. The expansion of BRICS means in this context that a significant number of countries in the Global South perceive the role of an interconnector as very promising. First of all, joining BRICS increases their political weight as regional and / or global players. On the contrary, strictly following the political and economic lead of the US and the West does not bring additional international political capitalization; rather, on the contrary, there is a danger of ending up in the second echelon of the Western-led “values-based partnership” due to the dubious democracy of their political regimes from the point of view of the Americans and Europeans. A pro-Western orientation in economic terms almost inevitably means maintaining the corresponding country or group of countries in their previous positions in international value added chains. Participation in BRICS and in the general development of comprehensive economic South-South interaction opens up significantly more opportunities in this regard. Taking advantage of integration into the Sino-centric economic circulation zone, many old and new BRICS members will simultaneously seek to gain additional benefits as a connecting link with the US-centric zone. Moreover, they will most likely be participants or even initiators of a number of projects within the BRICS framework, objectively leading to a general increase in the share of non-Western countries in the world economy and politics.

Although China, due to its economic weight, plays an exceptional role in BRICS, the group itself in its expanded composition can be considered as an umbrella format for intensifying a wide variety of interactions between non-Western state actors. In a sense, the expanded BRICS, as well as BRICS+, can be presented as a school of multilateral dialogue, unmediated by Western-dominated institutions and mechanisms of global governance. It is not hierarchy, but network structuring, the

building of many horizontal connections between international actors at various levels that ensure the gradual strengthening of the World Majority at the current stage of global development.

Conclusion

Why is the BRICS group today so attractive to the countries of the World Majority, acting as its *de facto* leader? The real weight of the joint actions of the BRICS countries is given not only and not so much by the totality of their resource capabilities, soft and hard power factors, but by far-reaching changes in these countries associated with the fight against poverty, reduction of inequality, demographic transition, urbanization, adaptation of mass groups to lifestyle and consumption standards of the information society, changes in identity, articulation of images of the future. Despite all the obvious differences and disproportions between the BRICS countries, in the coming decades they will account for the “critical mass” of global transformations, the result of which, obviously, will be a new, post-Western picture of the world of the 21st century.

There is a growing worldwide interest in non-Western structures that offer alternative formats of international economic cooperation, as well as, which seems no less important, alternative ideological approaches to understanding world politics. In contrast to the hegemonic approach, which prescribes a certain interpretation of liberal values to the whole world, the SCO and BRICS countries offer the world a mutually respectful dialogue of cultures, ideas and value systems.

The year 2023 determined the vectors for the further development of SCO and BRICS. A very restrained approach to the expansion of these structures was replaced – especially clearly in the case of BRICS – by a choice in favor of extensive growth. This choice is justified in the context of the sharply accelerating destruction of the unipolar world order. The expanded SCO and BRICS do not form an alternative institutionalized system of

global governance by themselves, but through the tightening of connections and interactions of the countries of the World Majority they create more favorable conditions for the emergence of such a system before the end of the first half of the 21st century.

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