



# The World Majority and Its Interests

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# Introduction

The emergence, in 2022, of a large group of countries, which in the Russian foreign policy discourse is referred to as the “World Majority,” came as a most meaningful event in the modern-day international life. The World Majority countries refused to be part of the economic and other sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West and have kept unchanged, or even expanded, trade and investment relations with Russia. This concept includes a varied group of countries from all continents (except Australia) that come in different sizes, which are not members of the same political associations and often conflict with each other. This group did not emerge exclusively in connection with Russia, but is rather a product of evolution of the international system. However, the Russia-West conflict catalysed its appearance as a formal concept.

The motives behind the World Majority countries’ conduct can only partially be accounted for by the logic of the earlier studies of international politics. In other words, the science of international relations lacks convincing tools that it could use to conduct an analysis of the motives driving such a heterogenous group of countries, which we have so far considered as an integral whole only in theory.

Nonetheless, the World Majority is something that really exists in global politics and the economy and has a bearing on the military and political crisis in relations between Russia and the Western countries and contains features that could shape the future international order. In any case, this sum total of countries has been united by an important aspect of their conduct with regard to the ongoing conflict of global consequence, which can seriously affect the positions of its key participants. Therefore, it can be regarded as a factor that is momentous for the historical process and the evolution of the international system rather than a random or isolated instance.

The key question for Russia is whether a single policy with regard to a vast group of countries, which are neither consolidated nor united by common principles, is possible at all. The answer to that question has a purely practical purpose and does not appear to have an outright positive or negative slant. We are at the earliest stages of getting a sense of what changing international reality may bring us.

A series of discussions with the participation of leading Russian experts specialising in development and political systems of specific regions and countries took place at the Valdai Club in 2024. The main participants in the discussions included Denis Degterev, Professor at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs

at HSE University; Victor Jeifets, Professor of RAS, Director of the Ibero-American Studies Centre at the St Petersburg State University; Yevgeny Kanaev, Professor at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at HSE University; Vasily Kashin, Director of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at HSE University; Alexander Korolev, Deputy Director of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at HSE University; Alexei Kupriyanov, Head of Centre of the Indo-Pacific Region, Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the RAS (IMEMO); Mayya Nikolskaya, Acting Director of the Centre for African Studies at MGIMO University's Institute for International Studies (IMI); Dmitry Rozental, Director of the Institute of Latin America at RAS; Ivan Safranchuk, Professor at the Department of International Relations and Foreign Policy of Russia, Director of the Eurasian Studies Centre at MGIMO University's Institute for International Studies (IMI); Nikolai Surkov, Associate Professor at MGIMO University's Department of Oriental Studies; Dmitry Suslov Deputy Director of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at HSE University. The issues that this report addresses were extensively discussed during a series of other Valdai events in 2022-2024. The findings of these discussions were used by the main author of this report.

This paper addresses the efforts to define the phenomenon referred to in the Russian discourse as the "World Majority." It highlights its potential impact on the existing and future international order, and attempts to clarify the motives that influenced the foreign policy decisions made by specific countries from this group. The report centres on key points of interaction between the World Majority and Russia's opponents in the West and analyses the limits of its impact on key international processes and events. Lastly, the report provides a broad overview of the prospective approaches that Russia could use in the future in its World Majority policies.

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## In search of a definition

Terminology is critical in times of confrontation: the way a message is conveyed becomes a message itself. The importance of the words that are used to discuss key international issues should not be underestimated, either. From our perspective, understanding how Russia can propagate its categories among the international political and intellectual community and what obstacles it may face along the way is crucially important.

Over the past two years, the World Majority concept has firmly taken root in the Russian political and expert debate on international politics and the economy. It was first used in 2022<sup>1</sup> and has since been widely used in official statements by officials from Russia's and several other countries' foreign ministries, as well as in academic research and expert assessments.<sup>2</sup> The term "World Majority" is a fundamental concept used in Russia's modern-day international politics and the economy. It serves as a reference point for assessing the activities of different international partners and the potential for developing cooperation.

This is both an advantage and a shortcoming of our reasoning about international politics. It is an advantage because it allows for a more systematic understanding of global political and economic realities and helps see the underlying motives behind our partners' conduct. It is a shortcoming, because it inevitably creates a "temptation for excessive generalisation with an implicit assumption that the 'majority' is something consolidated and united by common principles." However, "it is important to be mindful of the fact that the World Majority is definitely not an established anti-Western bloc. It is certainly not a pro-Russia bloc, either, no matter how much we might want it to be that."<sup>3</sup>

The World Majority concept has not yet been incorporated into the discourse of the countries that are friendly to Russia and is not used at the level of political statements, documents, or declarations. Moreover, representatives of the expert community in some countries, which Russia categorises as the World Majority members, sometimes object to using this term in joint documents. The specialists we consulted did not note any examples of the term being used in a way similar to how Russia uses it in the countries of Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, or Africa, although experts believe that the African intellectual community is more receptive to Russian narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> See Караганов С.А. От не-Запада к Мировому большинству // Россия в глобальной политике. 2022. Т. 20. No. 5. С. 6-18. URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-sapada-k-bolshinstvu/> (accessed 11.09.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Тренин Д. В., Крамаренко А. М. Политика России в отношении Мирового большинства. Доклад под ред. С.А. Караганова // Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики». 2023. URL: <https://publications.hse.ru/books/885860684> (accessed 11.09.2024).

<sup>3</sup> Косачев: В 2023 году появилось отвергающее однополярную модель мировое большинство // Российская газета. 26.12.2023. URL: <https://rg.ru/2023/12/26/kosachev-v-2023-godu-poiavilos-otvergaiushchee-odnopolianuiu-model-mirovye-bolshinstvo.html> (accessed 11.09.2024).

## The Global South

Opinion leaders and heads of friendly foreign countries either do not use specific terms to describe the group of countries which do not oppose Russia, or use terms like the “Global South,” “emerging economies,” or “global majority” (meaning the developing countries formerly known as the “third world.”) These concepts have taken root in research literature, journalism, political statements, and the media.

The “Global South” is the most widely used term and appears to carry on the tradition of the developing countries positioning themselves in opposition to the West as former colonial or current neo-colonial powers. In particular, the term “Global South” is most commonly used by Indian diplomacy to promote its own perspectives on international affairs and to showcase its stance on key development issues. This term is also used in the foreign policy rhetoric of the Southeast Asian countries, occasionally China, the Arab countries of the Gulf, the Middle East, and North Africa.

The term “Global South” (which has, in fact, replaced the term “developing countries”) is most commonly used in Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, but with a subtle difference: it is relatively uncommon in Argentine discourse (that was the case under the 2006-2015 neo-Peronist and the 2019-2023 Kirchnerist administrations), since Argentina tends to identify with the West on a mental plane, even when it pursues policies that are typical of the Global South countries. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Brazil, the term has long since gained currency and is relatively common in Mexico, which has very close economic ties with the United States and Canada.

LAC countries, which have for decades been victimised by imperialist and neo-colonial policies, find themselves closely aligned with the Global South countries in this regard, even though many of their elites would opt for an alliance with the conditional West. This is why the lack of fair representation at global financial institutions which perpetuates their status of a periphery of the global economy ranks number one in LAC countries’ awareness of the fact that they are not part of the West, in full or in part. The fiercely anti-American Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua (and to a lesser extent Bolivia) had no problem finding common language with Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Mexico which leaned towards Washington.



The “Global South” is an established concept in political and academic discourse in the West where it is used on a par with the term “Global Majority,” which is traditionally used there as a euphemism for the non-whites around the world, or as a collective name for the developing countries. Generally speaking, Global South is most commonly used to designate the non-Western world in the countries that Russia describes as the “World Majority,” whereas “Global Majority” is how the West describes the non-West.

Russia’s World Majority concept has the potential for much wider use, but it is running against the established definitions which is why it is essential to take the introduction of this concept seriously, as it can be used as a tool for Russia’s presence in the global political and academic discourse, as well as in state, public and scientific diplomacy, including at international organisations in which Russia is actively participating.

The fact that the general definition proposed by Russia gets rejected is an attribute of the World Majority countries’ conduct, a manifestation of their agency. This independence is spontaneous and not a product of a strategic calculus. It is driven by the opportunities provided by the Russia-West conflict, but it is not essential for the survival of the group of the countries in question.

The World Majority countries are not striving to designate themselves as a newly arisen international reality and prefer to use familiar terms in relations with their high-stakes Western partners, even though they emphasise their new status. Russia is crucially important for them as a political leader driving the transformation of the world order, an important foreign economic partner, and a core player in international politics. However, not following Russia’s concepts does not pose a threat, unlike their relations with the West, which still has a hold on educational, scientific, and financial resources, as well as leading media outlets. In other words, Russia may be coming up with its own discursive categories, but it is unable to force these countries into compliance threatening with consequences that may follow in case they fail to do as it says.

It is crucial to remember that even the fact of maintaining friendly relations with Russia can cause significant pressure from the West. Most World Majority countries – with a few exceptions such as North

Korea, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Myanmar, and the Sahel Alliance – are not inclined towards conflict with the United States or Europe on matters of fundamental interests and values, even when the West treats them dismissively. The World Majority concept is construed differently in China, India, the Arab East (Gulf countries), Latin America, and Southeast Asia. It takes on an interpretation of its own in each region and reflects each particular country's identity, which offers hope for the gradual introduction of the Russian vision into discussions.

### **Africa: A space of opportunity**

Africa boasts the greatest potential for spreading the World Majority concept for several reasons.

First, new political generations in diplomacy and expertise are coming to the fore. Those most closely tied to the West during the post-colonial period, who acted as conduits for Western interests and discourse, are gradually leaving the scene, as does the influence of the Soviet-variety socialist ideology embraced by older generations of African politicians, diplomats, and scholars. This has created a relatively open space for competing ideas and embracing alternative diplomatic and political science paradigms (Russian or Chinese) amid African academia's growing push to diversify its knowledge sources and to establish more extensive contacts with the Russian academic community.

Second, there is a latent distrust of Western narratives among the African population, including the intelligentsia. Alternative theories were popular on that continent in the 1980s, and some memories of them persist to this day which is why African countries are not entirely engulfed by Western concepts and are striving to adopt new international relations terminology. The exceptions include the leading countries, such as South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, to name a few, in which opinion leaders and academia still primarily use Western terms. However, even there, not everyone is willing to follow in the wake of Western discursive dominance.

Put together, these two factors mean that the younger generation of leaders, scholars, public figures, and media personalities in African countries is willing to adopt the concepts offered by Russia. Russia should use its policies to back this willingness up.

## Expanding terminology space

We can view the World Majority as a concept holding a significant academic potential, meaning it has the capacity of being further explored in scholarly literature. Russian academic circles offer a clear and well-founded definition of this term. Spreading the World Majority concept at the level of academic discourse will partially follow a natural course as it continues to be used in scholarly texts authored or co-authored by Russian scholars. This path is quite challenging, though, considering the West's structural power when it comes to disseminating knowledge – aka “knowledge hierarchy” – through bibliometric platforms and Western publishers under its control, among other things.

Internationalising Russian academic journals and building genuine partnerships with BRICS countries is critical. Providing state support to joint research projects that focus on the World Majority phenomenon with an emphasis on that concept, in collaboration with our colleagues from friendly countries, holds a lot of promise as well.

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# The World Majority and international order

The World Majority is a structural category that encompasses a significant group of countries which pursue relatively or entirely independent policies in relation to the interests of the great powers involved in the global face-off (the United States, China, and Russia). With the exception of the countries which fully sided with Russia in matters of the special military operation in Ukraine, the vast majority of the countries around the world are not ready to choose, now or in the future, between Russia and its opponents in the West, and even less so between China and the United States. The World Majority is not an organisation or an association. Moreover, the emergence of this phenomenon results from these countries' reluctance to subordinate their foreign policy to collective or individual interests of other world powers.

This fundamental attribute of this group is likely to persist into the future and to prevent the creation of something along the lines of the Non-Aligned Movement. First, the World Majority countries do not seek to

become part of the unions with the potential of one country dominating others. Second, the Non-Aligned Movement positioned itself as an alternative to both East and West which is not an option today, because Russia does not lead anything that can be described as a major group of allies, nor is it seeking to fully align other countries' foreign policies with its own interests. The likelihood of seeing the non-alignment movement come back to life might become more realistic if Russia and China choose to formalise an alliance. However, even this scenario will not be smooth sailing, either, since we've seen countries that are friendly to Russia, such as India or Vietnam, trying to strengthen their ties with the West.

Admittedly, the World Majority countries are pursuing a policy that is not a "non-alignment" policy, but a policy of equal distancing from the participants in the global confrontation (which we will discuss later), on the one hand, and "multi-alignment" on the other hand, as they join projects and alliances involving the Western countries, China, and Russia. For example, India is simultaneously a member of Quad, BRICS, and the SCO.

So far, the World Majority has been conceptually opposite to the collective West, which is a community that rallies around a single leader and shares common interests and values. Countries that are part of economic or even military-political unions with China and Russia (such as the CSTO and the EAEU) are also part of the World Majority since these alliances (with rare exceptions) do not follow strict rules and are not designed to oppose other great powers which is why the World Majority countries can, in some cases, pursue similar policies with regard to the United States and Russia/China. In other words, Russia may find objectionable the policies of the World Majority countries which are hypothetically close to Russia. By the same token, Washington or the EU may find unsatisfactory the policies of the US-allied countries that are traditionally close to the West. The actions of Russia's allies in Central Asia, or the US allies in the Persian Gulf are quite convincing in this regard.

Thus, the fact that the World Majority countries are strongly opposing the policies pursued by the West stems from their refusal to yield to external pressure except when alternative solutions are not available. Primarily, the issue is about these countries coming under pressure from international financial institutions. Whenever this happens, the Central Asian governments, which are pursuing policies that are friendly to Russia

and China, may find their borrowing potential with these institutions imperiled. The lighter this dependency, the more latitude the World Majority countries have in their actions, since economic self-sufficiency and sustainability are the key factors allowing them to keep their policies friendly.

As they continue to deny external pressure, the World Majority countries see the difference between the West, Russia, and China. For them, Russia is a partner, and they do not expect any pressure coming from it. In contrast, a large number of these countries see the United States and China as forces of similar nature, although there are distinctions: many African countries view American policies as outwardly hostile, while China's policies are seen as help in addressing healthcare and education issues.

This kind of foreign policy is not much different from the classic balancing strategy. However, given current circumstance, it has taken on new forms that need to be studied on theoretical and applied levels primarily because the international system itself is in a state of imbalance, unlike during the Cold War or earlier historical periods. As a result, balancing strategies have become more flexible, not necessarily leading to stable alliances or coalitions even when the issue is about particular matters of international affairs.

The push to maximise the autonomy, which underlies the World Majority's motivations, may not sit well with the West, Russia, or China, and sometimes be detrimental to their interests. Structurally, these countries behave alike, and Russia, China, or the United States find it difficult to have these countries follow in the wake of their interests. With some exceptions, the United States and the EU, have an edge in this regard, since they control global finance and international institutions, even though China is pressing hard with its own initiatives. Admittedly, countries like Iran or Myanmar cannot be considered allies of Russia or China without equivocation (nor are they officially), as they strive to maintain full sovereign control over their foreign policies, even though they position themselves as opponents to the West and its proxies, such as Israel.

The World Majority is centered on its own interests which is its hallmark. With the West's ability to serve as a reliable source of investment

and technology diminishing and its political pressure increasing, the World Majority countries will put up strong resistance to the United States and the European Union's push to force everyone into serving their interests. The "foreign policy capacity" of the United States and its closest allies in Europe and their ability to serve as providers of resources for addressing development tasks will remain one of the most important factors in the evolution of the World Majority as a political phenomenon.

The World Majority countries can be regarded as "bridges" between the West and its opponents, China and Russia, or platforms for negotiations or even economic activities. India, by far the largest member of this group, provides a vivid example. India is a member of BRICS, an association that is positioned as the main institutional alternative to the West. Yet, at the same time, India is making a point of having friendly relations with the United States and Europe. Vietnam, a country of a much smaller caliber than India, has adopted a similar stance. Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar play important intermediary roles in addressing practical issues related to the military conflict in Ukraine (such as prisoner exchanges, the return of children, the grain deal, and so on) and offer their services as mediators and negotiating platforms for the full resolution of the conflict. There are signs that numerous other World Majority countries, particularly Arab countries, also wish to become universal intermediaries between conflicting major powers.

In theory, the World Majority's interests can be systematised based on common behavioural criteria.

First, the World Majority countries always strive to enhance their independent ability to make foreign policy decisions, and even view rapprochement with Russia, China, or the West as a key to achieve this goal. These countries can be provoked into openly establishing an alliance with a particular great power only in case of an extreme existential pressure coming from other great powers.

Second, the World Majority countries are interested in keeping the global economy open and will not do anything that would damage this state of affairs. They are fully aware of the fact that the West is no longer a guarantor of globalisation, but rather undermines it by its policies. Accordingly, all initiatives taken by the World Majority to create an infrastructure for international trade, finance, and technological

exchange that would be independent from the West are designed not to take globalisation down, but to keep its elements intact.

Third, the World Majority countries are not ready to propose or seriously discuss an abstract “new international order.” They seek greater fairness regarding their interests, but are not willing to embark on a revolutionary path in order to achieve it.

Even though the World Majority countries are scattered across different regions (the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America), they are all willing to keep up friendly relations with Russia. Former Soviet republics which do not pursue hostile policies towards Russia and have special relations and ties with Moscow form a separate category. For these countries, certain distancing from Russia is typical behaviour shared by all members of the World Majority. These countries maintain friendly policies towards Russia overall, but are concerned about seeing it strengthen and seek to leverage the current circumstances to secure stronger positions in the future or at least hedge their positions by strengthening ties with alternative centres of power, whether globally (the United States, the EU, or China) or regionally (Turkey, Iran).

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## The World Majority and the Russia-West conflict

Initially, non-participation in the economic and political-humanitarian war waged by the United States and its allies against Russia was the hallmark of the World Majority countries’ conduct. This war has become a political and economic event of global proportions. Never before has a major power been subjected to such a vast array of external economic restrictions initiated by a relatively small group of powerful countries.

While the Cold War saw systemic confrontation between the East and the West, the key difference is that during that period, the countries of the socialist bloc were not global market participants. The sanctions

war waged by the West against Russia, which sharply intensified after the special military operation had started, is the first historical event of this scale and nature occurring at a time where every single economy around the world is a global market participant. This kind of connectivity underlies the efforts to assess the policies of the countries which have not joined the sanctions, even though they are forced – in most cases – to take account of their effects. Commercial entities from almost all World Majority countries (with few exceptions) have to react to the restrictions imposed by the West on Russia, even though the increased number of crackdowns on a number of companies from these countries by the United States and the EU are indicative of their efforts to circumvent the sanctions regime.

These efforts are often encouraged by the governments of the World Majority countries, especially when they see that the West itself has a stake in expanding relations with them, making it difficult for the West to impose secondary sanctions on their companies to punish them for doing business with Russia (as in the case of India). The reluctance, for economic and political reasons, to participate in sanctions against Russia remains a key sign and manifestation of independence. Many of these countries have significantly ramped up their trade and economic relations with Russia and strongly criticise Western unilateral sanctions at various international organisations and alliances (such as the UN, BRICS, and the SCO, to name a few).

Over the past two years, we have repeatedly witnessed signs of agency that went beyond non-participating in sanctions on Russia. In particular, most of the World Majority countries, with a few exceptions, have adopted a distinct stance with regard to the “peace summit” convened under US patronage in Switzerland in June 2024. Many non-Western participants refrained from endorsing the final communiqué, withdrew their signatures later, or used the platform to express their national positions rather than solidarity with Kiev. The World Majority countries are opposed to sending weapons and military equipment to Kiev, and to drawing the conflict out. Almost all of them agreed on the need to achieve a swift peaceful resolution with Russia’s full-fledged participation and consideration of its interests.

The World Majority countries’ scathing condemnation of Israel’s war against Gaza and their support for Palestine is another vivid example of the independent policies. This war has divided the world into the



World Majority and the Western Minority, much like the sanctions on Russia.

Thus, the World Majority countries' conduct is now marked not only by their efforts (passive or active) to avoid participating in the anti-Russian sanctions, but also by their desire to assert their positions on other significant matters as well. For many of them, the refusal to join the West's unilateral sanctions and criticising them – especially criticising their extraterritorial nature – are tools that they use to assert and reinforce their sovereignty. The World Majority representatives accurately pointed out that the extraterritorial sanctions imposed by the United States and its satellites compel third countries to refrain from entirely lawful interactions with Russia under international law, and are nothing more than an attempt to impose their own will on all nations and a violation of these nations' national sovereignty.

The World Majority's attitude towards Russia is not purely instrumental; for some of them, Russia serves as a counterbalance, and for others as a battering ram against the West's dominant position in international politics and, indirectly, in the economy. This view of Russia's role is the most popular, albeit not at the level of doctrines. Also, the World Majority countries believe that Russia is upholding its own interests in its conflict with the West, and these interests are not necessarily aligned with the interests pursued by the countries that are friendly to Russia.

Nevertheless, a key element of the World Majority countries' conduct is their desire to maintain constructive and balanced relations with all global players. Their refusal to participate in sanctions on Russia, let alone initiate them, does not indicate a desire to take a critical or hostile stance towards the United States or the EU. There are instances of such conduct, but they are rare exceptions rather than the rule. On the contrary, the World Majority countries' conduct can be described by a growing push to develop a dialogue with Russia and its main opponents. This is an objective attribute of the World Majority, which is inherent in almost all of its members.

Russia should keep this in mind as it tries to expand the diplomatic dialogue with friendly countries and to pursue its information policy. The World Majority countries' decisions not to join the Western sanctions war against Russia were (and continue to be) made based both on current economic benefits and conceptual approaches to foreign policy.

The leading World Majority countries can be used as a case in point to highlight the country specifics when making such decisions and the factors that unite them all.

## Country specifics

In *India*, for instance, the decision not to join the sanctions is a critical part of that country's national foreign policy strategy. India fundamentally believes that sanctions should only be imposed based on UN Security Council resolutions, and it never engages in this practice without broad-based international support. Indian representatives and diplomats cite numerous historical examples when their country refrained from participating in unilateral sanctions regimes. By doing so, they are making it clear that the current situation is not an exception for India's foreign policy, even though Russia and India share a unique relationship of privileged strategic partnership. Joining sanctions against Russia would run counter to New Delhi's foreign policy tradition.

In the case of India, a major importer of Russian oil now, commercial interests and the pursuit of profit are seamlessly integrated with its long-term principled stance on sanctions. India's special position and refusal to join Western sanctions on Russia are seen as tools to boost its clout in international affairs and to maintain an independent approach that is not subordinate to the interests of other major powers or alliances. This is a matter of principle for New Delhi in the context of its relations with the United States, which have taken on a particularly important dimension lately, and are used as a tool to contain China and a source of technology and investment. The Indian government is open about the fact that it prioritises relations with the United States and the European Union in order to address the country's most pressing developmental challenges.

However, this does not prevent India's leadership from standing firm when Western pressure takes on a demonstrative or politically driven aspect, especially in relation to India itself. In this context, we can assume that, for a number of other countries – not just India – the refusal to join the US-led “sanctions coalition” is a way to improve their standing and to maintain the unique position in international affairs, which they would otherwise lose. Western countries which have so far remained the centre of power in global politics are the primary targets of these policies.

The refusal of the *Arab Gulf states* to participate in sanctions relies on their strong opposition to become implicated into the competition between major powers, which is seen as a factor that can increase tensions in the Middle East and hinder the efforts to overcome global challenges (such as climate change, food security, pandemics, and the like). Additionally, the Arabs (not just the Gulf states) see Russia as a counterbalance to the West which prevents the United States from imposing its will on other countries. The Arab countries are not seeking to completely dismantle the world order, but want it to be balanced and free from a hegemon. They are known for calling for creating alternative global financial mechanisms and reforming the global governance system in order to make it more balanced and to increase the Global South's influence in international institutions, such as the UN or the IMF.

The Arab countries are trying to let the United States and the European Union know that they must reckon with their partners in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf area. They try not to openly challenge the West or create threats to the US or European interests that they may consider as vital. They also continue to cooperate with the West in matters that align with their own interests. Specifically, following the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in October 2023, the Gulf monarchies pressed the United States into stepping up their mediation efforts in order to prevent further escalation.

The Arab countries have economic reasons for criticising Western policies and maintaining cooperation with Russia. The Gulf countries view sweeping sanctions on Russia as destabilization of the global market, which can potentially lead to devastating disruptions in global trade and the financial system. For them, imposing economic restrictions of this scale, particularly freezing Russian foreign assets, is a taste of what may be lying ahead for them. Another motive is that the West has imposed sanctions without considering the economic interests of the Global South and without seeking their input, which has, among other things, caused disruptions in food supplies to the global market.

At present, the Arab countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates, have benefitted significantly from Switzerland (let alone London) losing its status as a neutral country and, along with that, its role as the primary negotiating platform for discussing political and

economic issues. Increasingly, the UAE is acting in this capacity. In addition, OPEC Plus, in which Russia is an important player, has become a crucial factor contributing to the Arab countries' ability to pursue more independent policies. Preserving this format is a priority for the Gulf countries in the context of their position on the global markets and their relations with consumers in China and the West. Russia conducts a balanced energy market policy which it coordinates with them and acts as a responsible player, whom they are willing to do business with in the future as well.

For *African countries*, the key factors underlying their refusal to participate in the sanctions include their direct interest in Russia (including as a counterbalance to the West), long-standing ties in the military-political and economic spheres, and the potential to gain or lose access to the funds that are necessary to address development challenges, issues of fighting poverty and hunger. The African countries stand closest to Russia, but are also vulnerable due to their dependence on Western-controlled international financial institutions and UN institutions also dominated by the United States and the European Union. In a sense, the African countries are the opposite of the wealthy Arab Gulf countries, which are not politically close to Russia, but are better equipped to resist pressure coming from the United States and its allies regarding compliance with the sanctions regimes, which impacted them significantly. The solution to this issue is not yet in sight, as the United States and the European Union firmly control the UN machinery and other international agencies' central offices on which the most needy African countries depend, as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, the central office of the African Union and regional economic communities in Africa, as they fund a significant portion of their annual budgets.

Among the *Southeast Asian countries*, only Singapore has joined the sanctions, but did so in a perfunctory manner. The other countries in the region emphasise their friendliness towards Russia, but remain guided by the actual size of their trade relations.

Vietnam stands separately and sees Russia as an important partner and a supplier of weapons, as well as a counterbalance in its relations with China. Vietnam is currently considered the friendliest nation among

the Southeast Asian countries<sup>4</sup> which was confirmed during the Russian President's visit to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in June 2024. While maintaining and strengthening friendly relations with the United States, Vietnam views them as a counterbalance to China's growing might, but it is not seeking to become a voluntary conduit for the US interests in the region or globally. China not responding in any way to Russia and Vietnam expanding their relations is indicative of the high level of trust in China-Russia relations and the maturity of Beijing's approaches to important matters of regional policy. The political strengthening of ties between Russia and Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries aligns with the emerging interest of some ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos) to be dialogue partners in the SCO.

The refusal at the government level to join the sanctions pressure on Russia in 2014 and 2022 was a common and fairly predictable stance of the *Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries*, which are also part of the World Majority. The LAC countries' position on this issue is clear: sanctions adopted by a minority are unacceptable, and the majority can only adopt them within the framework of and through the UN institutions; all other sanctions are unlawful. Notably, a significant portion of the business sector in LAC countries, particularly major businesses, is closely integrated into the global economy and tied in with their Western partners. This has led to LAC businesses taking part fractionally in sanctions, albeit not directly. In other words, secondary sanctions are observed by business entities, whereas the governments (except for the Bahamas) have refrained from participating in primary or secondary sanctions.

The fact that Chinese businesses, which have long pushed the United States and the EU into second or even third positions in a number of countries, continues to make inroads into the LAC economies also reduces the likelihood of the LAC countries' direct participation in sanctions. Moreover, LAC countries and their imports and exports have been significantly impacted by the European sanctions on Russia, leading to LAC countries' negative reaction towards the unilateral embargo that affects the Global South's interests.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, except for Myanmar, which under today's regime – after a military in 2021 – is itself at loggerheads with the West.

Influenced by their painful historical experience of being subjected to pressure and interventions by major global powers, primarily the United States, LAC countries denounce Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. This causes them to view Ukraine as a victim. Additionally, Latin American countries advocate the primacy of international law, and thus perceive the armed conflict negatively and interpret it as a violation of the diplomatic norms.

Two years into the conflict, the emotional perception of it in Latin America has vastly subsided. This trend can be seen from the polls conducted in 2022 and 2023: the number of respondents who believe that Ukrainian issues lie far from regional challenges has increased. Additionally, the economic situation in the Latin American countries has led respondents to speak in favour of reducing financial support to Kiev. Furthermore, in all surveyed Latin American countries, the number of respondents who believe in the "possible widening of Russian military actions" into other European countries has decreased.

Latin American countries (with rare exceptions) strive to maintain an inter-bloc status and not join any particular coalition. Despite their dependence on a number of Russian-made products, primarily fertiliser, companies in that region are wary of violating the sanctions regime fearing secondary sanctions and criminal prosecution by the US authorities. Thus, the countries of the region often adopt a pragmatic stance, striving to interact with all global political players who can provide them with economic assistance. The widespread rejection of the US hegemony by Latin American societies has not led to political distancing from Washington. Even traditional opponents of the United States, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, are willing to establish constructive relations with the White House. Overall, LAC countries adhere to a position of "active neutrality," which explains their refusal to participate in the "peace summit" in Switzerland. While not supporting Russia's position on the special military operation, LAC countries make it clear that the conflict can only be resolved through diplomatic means and compromises, which are impossible without Russia's involvement. Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala, which have aligned with the Western countries from the start of the conflict, are the exception to this rule.

## Equidistance of the World Majority

The World Majority countries clearly distinguish between participation in the Western sanctions and forcible compliance with them by individual companies that strive to keep their presence on the global market and to maintain good business environment. For these countries, it is important to objectively assess the consequences of pressure from the United States and the European Union and to keep in mind the possibility of becoming targets of secondary sanctions. There is a noticeable correlation between the scale of trade and economic relations with Russia and the partner countries' willingness to create more flexible mechanisms that can fully or temporarily mitigate the damage from secondary sanctions or the threat of imposing them.

India and Vietnam show that the push by large and relatively large World Majority countries to remain equidistant from the participants of the global confrontation objectively helps Russia advance its interests. These particular countries show the greatest flexibility and initiative in creating new forms of cooperation, and they are less susceptible to pressure from the United States, which has its own reasons for cooperating with them.

The World Majority countries' willingness to create parallel financial institutions, including payment systems, in order to continue relations with Russia varies accordingly. In certain cases (Vietnam, China), this process is gaining momentum. It stands to expect that the larger countries that are friendly to Russia and are not present on the US market will gradually move towards creating parallel trade infrastructures that are immune to US sanctions.

This will lay the groundwork for expanding international settlement, payment, and insurance systems outside Western-created structures. A new infrastructure for global finance and trade will take shape gradually over several years, if not decades, as the United States and the EU increasingly demonstrate their inability to negotiate and adapt mechanisms that they control to the shifting balance of power in the world and to the increasingly independent policies pursued by

the World Majority countries. For Russia, it is essential to maintain its position in the transforming global economy and trade, and to creative use of cryptocurrencies and other hybrid forms of payment.

The World Majority countries' equidistance strategy with regard to the key global competitors such as Russia, China, and the United States is applicable not only to the ongoing conflict between Russia and the West. The prevalence of this approach is rooted in the system-wide crisis of the US-led "liberal world order." A significant portion of the countries are no longer certain that the United States, still the most influential global power, can effectively act as a global distributor of benefits. The mounting reprisals in the US and Western policies, in general, are pushing many countries to hedge their risks. China's growing power is evident as well. However, the situation is more complicated than that. Many<sup>5</sup> countries are wary of China's potential proclivity towards domination and its practice of drawing small and medium-sized countries into debt. Such experiences of cooperating with China have become quite common in recent years, and are effectively exploited by Western propaganda to discredit China's policies.

Moreover, just like Russia, China does not have access to oversight over operations of international agencies and foundations that provide development resources. There is also debate over whether even major initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Silk Road Fund can be used as alternatives to Western financial institutions. In other words, China is not yet a full-fledged alternative to the West even amid relative weakening of the United States and the EU which contributes to greater independence and adaptability of the World Majority countries.

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## The World Majority and the old world order

The key US policy tools towards the World Majority countries should be studied closer. We know from real-life experiences that while these tools share common nature, their level of harshness and methods

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<sup>5</sup> Except the Gulf states.



vary among the regions. For example, the Arab Gulf countries are in a more vulnerable position than the Southeast Asian countries or, to some extent, African countries, because their security relies on the US military presence. However, they are doing their best to find ways to reduce this dependency, including through developing their own defence industry and establishing ties with other global players. India is a separate case entirely, as it cultivates friendly relations with the West and seeks to get technology and investment from it, but at the same time, a significant portion of its population and elites sympathise with Russia. A similar situation exists in Indonesia, although this sentiment is rather confined to military circles and is not part of a broader discourse.

The West refuses to acknowledge the phenomenon of the World Majority and the World Majority countries' push for greater independence and autonomy. The United States and Europe tend to view the situation through the all-too-familiar binary paradigm of bloc confrontation: the West and the West-led world order (now referred to as the "rules-based order") versus a group of "revisionists" represented by China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and several other countries leaning towards them. This group is attributed with a plot to destroy the existing "correct" order to either establish a new one based on their values and interests or to plunge the world into "global chaos" altogether. According to the United States and its allies, all other countries must necessarily choose sides with regard to the Ukraine conflict and the international order in general.

The West employs its customary carrot and stick approach in the form of intimidation or incentives in the form of benefits or slight enhancement of the status. Examples of such "carrots" include granting Kenya the status of a key US non-NATO ally or proposing Ghana as a host country for the next "peace forum" on Ukraine. However, with the exception of particularly vulnerable countries, this old method has lost its efficiency, which may eventually force the United States and the EU to adopt more flexible approaches.

A distinct feature of the World Majority countries' conduct is their "distancing" from the great powers with which they have the strongest economic and geopolitical ties. Since the West has far more relatively speaking "close" countries on its side than Russia or China, its problems stemming from the emergence of the World Majority as a group are more pronounced.

For the United States, this “distancing” is felt particularly strongly in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Persian Gulf. The US influence in these regions remains strong, so highlighting their autonomy from the United States has taken the centre stage there. However, in practical terms, it often takes the form of bargaining, as complete independence from the US influence seems unrealistic or impracticable to the local ruling elites.

The “distancing” from Europe is most pronounced in Africa, where France historically held strong positions. With the overall geopolitical weakening of major European powers, this distancing in Africa signals strategic self-determination rather than just a bargaining position.

Such “distancing” may irritate Russia when it comes to countries that are close to it, but this is an inherent trait of the World Majority’s conduct. Russia’s influence remains strongest in the former Soviet republics. They do not see a complete rupture with Russia and going under the wing of its opponents as a strategic goal (with the exception of the current governments of Ukraine, Moldova, and partially Armenia). The likelihood of “changing protectors” is lowest in the Asian countries which have strong positions in the global economy and politics; they pursue a balanced strategy, and their actions could serve as a prototype for the future international politics.

Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) countries, almost all of which have traditionally been closely linked to the United States, are now focusing on maximising the diversification of their trade and economic, and to a lesser extent, political contacts. In this context, many of them do not object to having relations with Iran.<sup>6</sup> This conduct is neither pro-Russian, nor pro-Chinese, and nor pro-Western, either. LAC countries strive to gain greater representation in global institutions, which is why they tend to maintain balanced and dynamic relations with all global power centres. Even the ones that have expressed explicit interest in joining BRICS (Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua have submitted official applications, and the president of Colombia has made declarations concerning joining) do not see BRICS as an anti-Western bloc. Instead, they view it as a means to ramp up their own influence around the world and engage in a dialogue with the West on equal terms.

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<sup>6</sup> Argentina, for which Iran’s accession to BRICS was among the most compelling reasons for dropping out of the process for joining the group, is an exception.

Even though trade relations between LAC and Russia have significantly expanded (\$20 billion trade numbers has left Soviet-era levels far behind), they still lag behind LAC trade numbers with the United States, the EU, or China. Investment cooperation numbers are infinitesimal. Thus, business ties play a smaller role in LAC's decision not to join sanctions than their desire to demonstrate an independent stance. LAC countries are not eager to switch to payments in national currencies in their trade with Russia (in the case of Brazil, this would make no economic sense for Russia due to a significant trade imbalance), even though they do wish to move away from payments in US dollars. They are not inclined to create parallel financial institutions, including payment systems, either. However, they are open to considering transactions with Russia in yuan through Chinese banks. This mainly applies to countries with the greatest number of trade ties with China.

Transposing the model of LAC's relations with the West and the Soviet Union to the modern-day context is not possible for a number of reasons. Traditional Soviet allies – the leftists, especially the Communist wing – have been weakened politically and are unable to become a key political force in most countries. Some leftists even hold more anti-Russian views than centrists and right-wing politicians (especially the new left in Chile, Argentina, and Peru). Cuba is skeptical as well: while it continues to pursue its traditional anti-imperialist policies, it does not see Russia as an anti-imperialist state. Nicaragua and Venezuela, which may, at first glance, appear as the most reliable allies are politically unstable. Moreover, they are searching for pragmatic ways to coexist with the United States, and only the stubborn and hardline stance adopted by the Washington hawks prevents them from starting serious talks.

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## Boundaries of the World Majority

The processing of the World Majority phenomenon and studying it and the key factors behind the conduct and the development of the countries that make up this group, as well as the potential consequences of their decisions and actions, and their impact on the interests of Russia,

China, and the West is at its earliest stages. It is still impossible to accurately define the boundaries of independence of the World Majority countries, as these boundaries are fluid due to the heterogeneity of the group and depend on specific circumstances and the dynamics of power balance among major global powers. It is likewise too early to say how their conduct will affect the unique position of the UN Security Council's permanent members in matters of international security.

The World Majority is gradually acquiring a voice of its own. The G5 countries have agreed that Africa and India would become permanent members when the UN Security Council gets reformed. Most likely, the African Union (AU) will be the permanent representative for Africa, and an African country presiding over the AU in a particular year will represent it in the Security Council.

Almost all World Majority countries strongly advocate the abolition of the veto right in the UN Security Council and for granting the General Assembly the right to decide on matters of war and peace, whenever the Security Council comes to a deadlock. This poses a significant challenge to the interests of the permanent members. Moreover, almost all of the World Majority countries are signatories to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and oppose the development, testing, production, stockpiling, deployment, transfer, and use of nuclear weapons.

Over the long term, this major group of countries is unlikely to join en masse the existing alliances that can level out their interests or strive to create their own international institutions or regional associations. They have had (and continue to have) such experiences which have not resulted in breakthrough successes. The issue is about ASEAN, a successful project overall, which is currently facing serious challenges as it has to decide on its future.

The World Majority will remain a distinctive behavioural phenomenon. In the long run, these countries, which represent an area of open competition, will continue to maintain their independence in policymaking and to avoid the "strategic choice" in favour of any particular major power or a group of powers.

The projection of the future international order with account taken of the World Majority phenomena may look as follows. The new world order will retain a rigid core in the form of major countries with the greatest military capabilities and special relations between them, which

will combine competition and balancing on the level of threats. However, these powers' control over everyone else would loosen, allowing the World Majority to gain stability and commensurate levels of influence. This most likely scenario does not imply a complete, much less abrupt, collapse of the status of the West (the United States and weakening Europe), Russia or China. However, the bulwark of the international system structure dating back to the imperial European order, the Cold War, or the unipolar world will gradually crumble away and at some point become unrecoverable.

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## The outlines of Russian politics

A preliminary analysis of the nature, motivation, and conduct of a broad group of countries that have come to be known in Russia as the World Majority makes it possible to come up with several conclusions/assumptions/recommendations as to what principles might, in the future, form the basis of Russia's policy in its interaction with this group.

1. Russia is not seeking to bring such a diverse community together around a single goal that is supported by all of its participants on a conceptual and practical level. The World Majority countries actually have the goal of creating a fairer international order, but there may be no force that consolidates them for waging a systematic and structured fight. It is better to operate on the premise that Russia's decisions at the bilateral level should correlate with the kind of justice the partner country is seeking for itself and its interests.
2. Interacting with the World Majority includes a set of flexible and dynamic bilateral relations of varying degrees of intensity. Russia should brace for situations that it will find not entirely comfortable. The World Majority countries' actions may be dictated by different motives topped by national interests of survival and development. This raises the requirements for country studies in Russia, including training and advanced training of the diplomatic corps and the industry-specific specialists from other agencies, to a whole new level. It is necessary to have a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of literally every World Majority country.

3. A multilateral approach, including at the regional level, remains important, although on a smaller scale than before. Amid global tensions, countries increasingly run their decisions by their own national interests rather than the commitments they have assumed during forums or as part of associations. All, without exception, multilateral formats created in the past are going through a rough patch, even the successful ones such as ASEAN. Russian policy towards the World Majority should be aimed at endorsing all initiatives advanced by friendly countries that are not detrimental to its interests.
4. Complete or dominant adherence to the interests and tactical preferences of the great powers by medium-sized and small countries is a thing of the past. Such practices are increasingly localised within the community of Western countries united by common interests in relation to the outer world. Accordingly, it is imperative to exclude, at the level of political rhetoric, calls for other countries to adopt the position of followers with regard to Russia. The attempts to fit them into one's own speculative geopolitical schemes would be a mistake.
5. The most important area of interaction with the World Majority includes dissemination of the discourse that Russia deems correct. The competition of ideas means as much as the competition of economic and military capabilities. Therefore, it is important for Russia to be fully aware of its limited resources and to actively participate in the international expert discussion. It is also important for Russia to promote its own categories of understanding the political reality, and to strive not to follow the simple path of assimilating and using the constructs created by Russia's Western opponents which it customarily followed.

Without a doubt, all of the above must center on Russia viewing its partners in the process of dynamic evolution of their own interests and constraints.

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