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A new line of geopolitical division

The most dangerous times come when the gap between the old hegemon and the new challenger shrinks. Then, the old rules of the game no longer apply

The term ‘Global South’ has recently become unusually widespread in Ukraine, although there is no unanimity in its understanding or its appropriateness. The proliferation is mainly due to the fact that the global dimension of the Russian-Ukrainian war has finally become evident: a challenge to a world order in which key developing countries play a defining role. The different interpretations of the term and the narratives attached to it reflect Ukraine's fears, lack of understanding and strategy towards these countries. Some of them are too close to Russia, others are sometimes too hostile to the West; they have their own agenda and perceive Russian aggression against Ukraine through the prism of their own experience and interests. And while the rhetoric of the Ukrainian leadership systematically addresses the need to restore a rules-based international order, developing countries are increasingly emphasising the desire to change those rules. The Russian-Ukrainian war is becoming part of a global context and processes that extend far beyond the control of its immediate participants – and that could make it even longer.

Just as 10 years ago one could hear talk everywhere about the rise of China, today one cannot help but hear about the rise of the Global South. China has grown so strong in those that the US has recognised it as a key geopolitical rival. The Global South is next.

Striving for a fairer world

’Third World’, Global South, periphery/semi-periphery, developing countries – all these terms encompass, to varying degrees, comparatively poor countries, many of them former colonies, in which the majority of the world's population lives. This large part of the population lives in relative poverty: annual per capita income in developing countries averages about $7,000, albeit within this group, it can range from $415 in Sierra Leone to nearly $30,000 in Saudi Arabia. What unites these

diverse countries is economic structure, technological dependence, vulnerability to financial capital flows and chronic lagging behind developed economies that already provide their citizens with annual per capita incomes of more than $55,000.

The problem, from the perspective of those who also use the words 'world-system' and 'periphery' instead of Global South, is far from just relative poverty. Different economic starting conditions, including the past five centuries, have created structural imbalances, forcing international policies to work in ways that give advanced capitalist economies even greater advantages in the future and condemn developing countries to perpetual underperformance.

The idea of a fairer world has of course been around for a long time, but from time to time, it becomes powerful enough to become a political slogan. The peculiarity of the current historical moment is that quite a large number of very different countries of the Global South are ready to support this idea in order to challenge the international rules of the game created by the West (Global North) for its own interests.

Interestingly, Ukraine, with an annual per capita income of about $4,500, also belongs to the group of developing countries.

The prerequisite for this is the gradual increase in the share of the Global South in the world's population, world economy and international politics. China's unprecedented economic growth over the last four decades is, of course, the most striking example and the most visible political factor. But China is not the only case. Its success story is already being repeated or may be repeated in the near future by India, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Vietnam, Malaysia, Kazakhstan or Nigeria – countries that are experiencing significant annual economic growth rates. The economies of the Global South are growing larger, but their populations are also growing, and as a result, not all of them have been able to fundamentally improve the well-being of their citizens.

According to views traditionally popular in Latin America, developing countries are caught in a dependency trap that keeps them at a great distance from developed economies. Some call it neo-colonialism, meaning that, formally, the metropolises are gone and independence has come, but in practice, the vulnerability and dependence of the economies of former colonies on the technology, markets and money of developed Western countries remains. Interestingly, Ukraine, with an annual per

capita income of about $4,500, also belongs to the group of developing countries. This impression is reinforced by prominent anti-colonial refrains in the rhetoric of our time, where the past is portrayed as an era of colonial dependence on Russia, which is the cause of many problems. Such approaches are well understood in Latin America, but the realities of security and war make Ukraine's strategic interests special.

The asymmetry of conditions cited by the Global South is a matter of international politics, and its weight has recently grown considerably. The spread of such views among a broad front of different states is gradually drawing a new line of geopolitical division: not between civilisations or ideologies, but between the developed countries of the Global North and the relatively poor and, more importantly, in its view discriminated against Global South.

BRICS and G20 – growing ambitions of the Global South

Today, China and India alone account for nearly 30 per cent of the world economy and 35 per cent of the world's population. If we add resource-rich Russia, Africa and the Middle East, the Global South would control more than half of the planet's energy resources. These are a large number of countries with dynamic economies that would like to replicate the success of the Asian Dragons, but often blame the West for their failure to do so. For all their diversity, they are united by the idea that the rules of the game in the global economy and international politics need to be revised in light of fundamental geopolitical changes. Recently, this idea has been accompanied by growing material opportunities, as well as a growing crisis of the old world order, of which the Russian-Ukrainian war was a symptom and catalyser.

The struggle for the future of the international order affects the work of international institutions. The permanent criticism from every side of the UN is complemented by the transformation of the role of new formats. Two of them have been in focus recently: BRICS and the G20, whose summits were held in August and September. The common denominator of these two forums was the growing ambitions of the countries of the Global South and their search for elements of a long-term strategy in the face of the crisis of the international security architecture.

The judgement on Russian aggression against Ukraine demonstrated the existence

The outcomes of the G20 meeting in New Delhi were controversial. On the one hand, many participants called the meeting a success,

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but on the other hand, it may be an attempt to pass off wishful thinking as reality. The key issues of the summit – global finance and climate change – remained without concrete answers; although this is the habitual style of G20 activities. The summit was a triumph for Indian Prime Minister Modi, and it seems, his aim was to achieve a diplomatic outcome at the cost of searching for compromise wording.

The judgement on Russian aggression against Ukraine demonstrated the existence of differing assessments and the limits of Western influence within the group of the world's largest countries. Going forward by seeking compromises, the West may find itself in a minority soon. A comparison of the final declarations of the previous G20 Summit, held in Indonesia, and the current one indicates that the forum's attitude to the Russian-Ukrainian war was and remains ambiguous. Among other things, this means that during the war, Western countries failed to convince the Global South that the war poses the same threat to them. The strategic response of China, India and other major developing countries has been rather slow to formulate, but now looks steady: the Russia-Ukraine war is a chance to change the rules of the game. The national interest systems of individual countries make Russia's defeat in this war unacceptable to them, with all sincere sympathy for the Ukrainians. With the crisis in the global security architecture, many countries in the Global South have begun to play their own game, guided by pragmatic interests.

Some of them have been doing this for a long time, such as the BRICS countries. Initially an amorphous and contradictory formation with abstract common interests and a low level of interdependence, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the general crisis of the international order, the group got a new breath and gained new perspectives. The summit in August agreed to expand the BRICS to include six new members, making the association more like a coalition of states from the Global South. While the economic dimension is weak, limited by the dependence on Western markets more than on each other's markets, the political and geopolitical dimensions of co-operation are growing stronger. At the core of these dimensions is the struggle to restructure the world economy to provide developing countries with a more attractive global exchange environment. The Russian-Ukrainian war and its international context have added to these aspirations other, more instrumental ones: for example, to increase resilience to Western sanctions.

The struggle for allies continues and spans the globe. It has already become not only a competition of geopolitical strategies, but also a confrontation of ideologies and visions of the future.

However, the planning horizons of the enlarged BRICS countries may be much broader. Russia's calls for the destruction of the West are of little interest to anyone, since the West is needed by major economies, especially China's, as a strategic trading partner. The question is what the terms of such trade will be. The Russian-Ukrainian war has also added the question of what the security implications of trade wars will be.

There is a theory that the most dangerous times come when the gap between the old hegemon and the new challenger for hegemony shrinks. Then, the old rules of the game no longer work, and regional conflicts become more frequent and intense. The Russian-Ukrainian war is a sign that these times may have arrived. This goes far beyond Eastern Europe and becomes part of the global struggle for international order.

The same theory suggests that hegemony's main asset is its alliances. In the wake of China's meteoric rise, Washington still had allies that Beijing did not. But the lessons the great powers are learning from the Russian-Ukrainian war have the potential to change things. The struggle for allies continues and spans the globe. It has already become not only a competition of geopolitical strategies, but also a confrontation of ideologies and visions of the future.



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