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The race for the Global South

Major powers can no longer enforce their national interests unilaterally or against the will of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America

The 15th BRICS summit, taking place in Sandton from 22 to 24 August, has been eagerly awaited. The event is particularly significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the conference is the group's first face-to-face meeting since the Covid19 pandemic. Secondly, according to information from South Africa, approximately 70 other countries from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean have been invited to participate, which would make it the 'largest gathering of the Global South in recent times to discuss current global challenges'. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for whom an arrest warrant has been issued by the International Criminal Court, will only participate via video conference, however, with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov representing him in person. A potential expansion of BRICS membership is set to be one of the agenda's main topics. According to the South African Foreign Ministry, 23 countries have already submitted official membership applications, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Indonesia, Egypt, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan.

An increasing divergence between 'West' and 'South'

Since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine, one paradox has become increasingly evident: whilst Moscow has been unable to achieve its political goals in Ukraine (demilitarisation and regime change), it appears to be making progress with one of its foreign policy's long-term aims. Already in its 'Foreign Policy Concept' at the turn of the century, Russia announced its aim to establish a multipolar international relations framework and to put an end to Western hegemony. One consequence of Russia's attack on Ukraine is the increasing evidence of a geopolitical divergence between the West and the Global South. While the West is largely standing beside Ukraine, supporting it with arms deliveries and imposing sanctions on Russia, the reactions of many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Arab World have been hesitant. The United

Arab Emirates, for instance, has emphasised that taking sides would increase violence rather than promote a political solution. In view of this, the new version of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, published on 31 March 2023, prioritises the expansion of relations with the Global South. Since the start of the war, the Russian Foreign Minister has visited the regions mentioned above on several occasions.

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While Nancy Pelosi, the former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, was on a trip to Taiwan, the Russian Foreign Minister set off for Southeast Asia on 2 August 2022. After a brief stop in the capital of its close ally Myanmar – the only member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to have expressed at least verbal support of Russia's intervention in Ukraine –Lavrov participated in the meeting of the Russia-ASEAN Council of Foreign Ministers in Cambodia, the gathering of Foreign Ministers at the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The agenda of his trip to Cambodia demonstrates the visit's multilateral nature. As the Russian Foreign Ministry explained in advance, the focus was on strengthening Russia's position in the Asia-Pacific region.

As the prospects of cooperation between Russia and the West will remain bleak for the foreseeable future, it seems likely that Russia will strive to increase its presence in Asia more resolutely than before. It is significant that Lavrov's visit took place at the same time as Pelosi's Asia tour (Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore), which included the controversial visit to Taiwan. With this in mind, it seemed all the more important for Moscow to emphasise its desire to bring 'cooperation and not provocation' to the region. In an interview on the margins of the ASEAN summit in Indonesia in mid-July 2023, the Russian Foreign Minister also declared Russia's intention to establish a Greater Eurasian Partnership on the basis of cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and ASEAN. Russia's commitment to Southeast Asia clearly aims to highlight its diplomatic options beyond the US and Europe, and beyond China in the Asia-Pacific region.

Russian presence in Africa …

Although Southeast Asia remains one of Moscow's leading regional priorities, no region has received more attention from Russia since 24 February 2022 than Africa. During this period, the Russian Foreign Minister has visited eleven of the continent's countries, including South Africa, Ethiopia, the Congo and Uganda. As with Southeast Asia, Moscow has had to compete at times with the US and China, whose Foreign Minister Qin Gang visited Ethiopia, Gabon, Angola, Benin and Egypt in mid-January 2023, while the US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen set off on a trip to Senegal, Zambia and South Africa at almost the same time as Lavrov.

South Africa is Russia's most important partner on the African continent. Pretoria abstained at each of the UN votes on the war in Ukraine. At her meeting with Lavrov, the South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor announced that her country was in favour of a rapid and peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine by diplomatic means. South Africa's political opposition rejects, however, this approach: Darren Bergman, the deputy of the opposition party Democratic Alliance (DA) urged Pandor to forego the meeting with Lavrov. The DA's chairman John Steenhuisen travelled to Ukraine in May 2022 and criticised Pretoria's position at the UN. Finally, the opposition went to court to force the government to arrest the Russian President — should he travel to the BRICS summit.

In contrast to South Africa, Lavrov's visits to the Republic of the Congo and Uganda were new initiatives motivated by strategic considerations. To date, both countries have abstained at all UN General Assembly votes on the war in Ukraine. Moreover, Uganda assumed the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement and will host the association's 19th summit in 2024. When it comes to its confrontation with the West, Russia has a strong interest in being on friendly terms with as many impartial countries as possible. The Congo and Russia have enjoyed close relations since Soviet times. The current Congolese Foreign Minister Jean-Claude Gakosso graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at the Leningrad State University in 1983. In addition to this, Africa can look back on a long tradition of non-alignment and is striving for a greater say in international affairs, seen in Africa's mediation initiative in the war in Ukraine.

… and Latin America

Russia's relations with Latin American countries have intensified since the turn of the millennium. Currently, Moscow is maintaining

diplomatic relations with all of the region's 33 countries. Making it all the more surprising that only four Latin American countries are characterised as 'friends' or 'partners' in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept – Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua. Relations with the other states are to be strengthened by 'taking account of their level of independence and their constructive policy stance with regard to the Russian Federation'. Lavrov's official visits in April of this year also only included the four countries mentioned above.

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Brazil has been Russia's most important economic and political partner in the region for many years, with both countries enjoying membership status in the BRICS group. Moscow also approved of Brazilian President Lula's refusal to support Ukraine with ammunition supplies in January 2023. In mid-April 2023, he enraged Washington with his reproach that the US was contributing to the continuation of the war rather than promoting peace. In Nicaragua, the focus is mainly on geopolitical considerations. These consist principally of the attempts of both sides to resist Western dominance. The international isolation of Nicaragua's Head of State Daniel Ortega was reinforced by the most recent judgement by the UN Expert Group, which accuses him of crimes against humanity, while Putin faces an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Ukraine.

Presumably, the visits to Venezuela and Cuba were triggered by both countries' moves to start relaxing their fraught relations with the US since the end of 2022. At the start of December of that year, the US oil company Chevron signed agreements with the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA covering the resumption of drilling in Venezuela. In January 2023, Chevron dispatched the first ships with Venezuelan oil to the US. In addition to replacing the missing oil imports from Russia, Washington's aim is to reduce Russian influence in Venezuela. In this complex situation, Russia's ability to provide an effective counter is considerably reduced. Nevertheless, Lavrov has warned Caracas not to trust the United States, as 'they frequently deceive rather than keep their own promises'.

Relations between the US and Cuba have developed a certain

momentum following the resumption of scheduled and chartered flights as well as the granting of permission for group and educational travel in both directions. Moscow also wants to strengthen its presence there and is advising Havana on Cuba's transformation to a market economy. Russia consistently deplores the US embargo against Cuba, while the latter opposes Western sanctions, as well as the policy of isolating Russia, and regards NATO expansion as the main reason for the war in Ukraine. A renaissance of Russian-Cuban relations as in Soviet times is, however, not in the cards: nowadays, Cuba can choose between a broad range of foreign policy partnerships that would offer it greater autonomy.

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Russian diplomacy in Latin America reveals a shift in Moscow's priorities: in its confrontation with the West, as in the twentieth century, ideological and geopolitical criteria are being emphasised and countries prioritised that either support the Russian position or, like Brazil, remain neutral.

At first sight, the Russian diplomatic offensive suggests that the West's aim to isolate Russia has failed. A closer look would, however, suggest a somewhat differentiated picture. Firstly, Moscow's range of partners has decreased following the invasion, a factor which is most clearly visible in Latin America. Secondly, in some important partner countries, a strong opposition to Russia prevails. Moscow nevertheless counts on loyalty and support, particularly in Africa, of which Lavrov's three trips with a total of 11 state visits are a clear indication. The increasing competition for stakes in the countries of the Global South and their participation in the search for a solution to the military conflict in Europe mark a turnaround: major powers are nowadays barely capable of enforcing their national interests unilaterally and against the will of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This key difference from the confrontation between two ideological blocks in the twentieth century will shape the nascent multipolar world order. The Global South will not forego its new privilege of manoeuvring among several major players and using the scope of its foreign policy to its own advantage.



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