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The ‘world majority’: an imagined political community.

Russia’s vision of the role of BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the design of the new international order

Mira Milosevich-Juaristi

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Executive summary

The ‘world majority’ is not an institutionalised alliance but rather a symbolic and imagined community encompassing countries in the Global South and East that, from Moscow’s perspective, share the desire to liberate themselves from the Western world. It is more of a political than an empirical concept. The term ‘world majority’ carries a threefold connotation: (a) ideological, by advancing an inclusive narrative that legitimises Russia’s isolation; (b) rhetorical, by transforming its status from ‘sanctioned minority’ to ‘emancipatory vanguard’; and (c) diplomatic, by justifying the search for flexible and pragmatic alliances with States that do not necessarily share an explicitly anti-Western agenda.

Moscow has turned its war on Ukraine into an essential instrument for reshaping the international order. Apart from the mere territorial conquest of a neighbouring state, its goal is to inculcate a multipolar world that challenges the West’s liberal and democratic principles.

Russia portrays itself as having its own civilisation, distinct from the West’s. The civilisational approach serves to legitimise a multipolar order based on spheres of influence. Russian rhetoric maintains that the world is moving towards a multipolar order organised around civilisations and not around States, which justifies Russian claims to a hierarchical leadership in its neighbourhood, the strengthening of the *Russkiy Mir* and the rejection of Western universalism.

The State-civilisation narrative expresses Russia’s post-Western messianic strategy. This ideological framework enables Moscow to reject the liberal order that emerged after 1991; to align itself with revisionist ‘civilisations’ such as China, India and Iran; and to project itself as a military guarantor of a new and more fragmented and plural new world order, where a greater role is played by the Global South and a lesser one by the West.

The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are Russia’s two mainstays of the post-Western order. The two institutions have become the multipolarity laboratory

and the political vanguard of the ‘world majority’. Russia sees both frameworks as a complementary institutional ecosystem: the SCO reorganises Eurasia along sovereignty and civilisational lines, while the BRICS transmit this transformation to the global stage by means of alternative institutions that erode the West’s normative hegemony.

The war in Ukraine marks the end of the liberal cycle and accelerates the break-up of the international order. The conflict has consolidated the rupture between Russia and the West, strengthened the convergence between revisionist powers and reinforced the perception in the Global South that the liberal order is unequal and excessively Western.

The EU faces a structural challenge to its political, economic and normative model. The fragmentation of the liberal order weakens its foreign policy, limits its influence in the Global South, increases its economic and energy vulnerabilities and obliges it to construct new strategic autonomy capabilities in an environment characterised by non-Western economic and security networks.

Spain faces specific risks in its neighbourhood and in Latin America, but also opportunities if it acts as a bridge. The Euro-Asiatic axis alters the balance in the Mediterranean and the Sahel, while the Russian narrative reduces the European influence in Latin America. Spain should strengthen security in its southern flank, renew its Ibero-American strategy, diversify its energy sources and position itself as a focal point between the EU and the Global South.

For the time being, the challenge posed by the ‘world majority’ is more narrative and symbolic than military and economic. Europe and Spain need to demonstrate that their political model continues being capable of generating legitimacy and cooperation in a plural world. The response to the civilisational order advocated by Russia cannot be based on a nostalgic defence of liberalism but rather a strategic overhaul. This means a less Eurocentric, more autonomous Europe, capable of competing for global recognition by means of coherence, innovation and reciprocity.

Europe needs to accept that multipolarity is not a transient scenario but rather the structure of the new global order. It is necessary to redefine strategic autonomy in a comprehensive, military, technological, energy and cognitive way, thereby contributing to a more balanced transatlantic relationship.

The EU and Spain need to counteract the attractiveness of the world majority narrative by means of a less moralistic and more relational foreign policy based on reciprocity and shared interests. To this end it is worth fostering: (a) associations with Africa and Latin America aimed at sustainable development, education and technological innovation; (b) a reformulation of cooperation policy so that it competes with the offer of the BRICS+ in the financing of infrastructure, prioritising institutional quality, environmental sustainability and

the transfer of know-how, c) support for the reform of multilateral institutions to bolster the representation of the Global South and reduce the scope for legitimacy that Russia exploits.

Spain, as a mid-ranking power that aspires to act as a bridge, should: consolidate itself as a European champion of the Global South connecting the EU to Latin America, the Maghreb and West Africa; prioritise security in its southern flank by cooperating with Morocco, Algeria and the Sahel countries; devise an overhauled Ibero-American strategy that harnesses the value of Spanish as a language of power and promotes technology and energy alliances in Latin America, and bolsters energy diversification by means of interconnections with North Africa that consolidates Spain as a European gas and renewable energy hub.

Strengthening strategic and forward-thinking diplomacy: the reconfiguration of the international order requires a more forward-thinking and multidimensional style of strategic intelligence. It is essential to endow centres of analysis and public diplomacy with the ability to understand the narratives of the Global South and to counteract Russian and Chinese disinformation; to foster training in comparative strategic culture and foreign policy, especially in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, and to orchestrate a structured Euro-Asiatic dialogue that enables the dynamics of the BRICS+ and the SCO to be understood and, whenever possible, influenced from a realist and not purely reactive perspective.

1. Introduction: Russia in an international order undergoing reconfiguration

In 2017, the journal *Foreign Affairs* devoted its January-February issue to the future of the liberal international order in a context marked by the visible decline in the so-called 'unipolar moment' (1991-2001), when the US wielded hegemonic leadership as the only global superpower. [1] The academic and strategic debate about the international order since then has revolved around three central questions: (a) the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the concept of the 'liberal international order', (b) the inability of the prevailing system to integrate the ascent of new powers and (c) the lack of consensus regarding which elements should be preserved and which should be reformulated.

This Policy Paper uses the definition proposed by John Ikenberry, who conceives the liberal international order as the fusion of two historical projects. First, the modern State system that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), based on national sovereignty, and, secondly, the Anglo-American liberal order of the 20th century, founded on multilateral institutions, representative democracy and a market economy. Following the First World War, Wilsonian idealism[2] proposed an international architecture focused on the promotion of democracy as a guarantor of lasting peace. After 1945 and during the Cold War, the US consolidated the 'free world' by disseminating democratic values amid the ideological challenge of communism and the Soviet geopolitical threat.

The political principles of this project were set out in the Atlantic Charter (1941), while the economic principles were crystalised in the Bretton Woods Accords (1944) and in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, 1947). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Washington replaced its policy of

1 *Foreign Affairs* (2017).

2 A concept derived from the name of the then US President, Woodrow Wilson.

Soviet containment with a strategy to ‘broaden democracy’, as Bill Clinton described it, for democratic and liberal expansion, convinced that the global ideological battle had been won. This outlook, reflected in the end of history thesis, promoted an international order founded on the free market and liberal democracy as universal models.

This order was never exempt from internal contradictions, however. While the Westphalian system aspired to an equilibrium between sovereign States –a model that US diplomacy deemed appropriate to Europe prior to 1945– the liberal order fostered global governance geared towards norms, multilateral institutions and growing limitations on State sovereignty. The creation of new institutions after the Cold War, such as the International Criminal Court, and the formulation of doctrines such as the ‘responsibility to protect’, reflected a post-Westphalian pivot that legitimised, for example, the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Kosovo (1999) in the name of universal values.

The current debate regarding the liberal order stems from the perception that this system, led by the US, is going through a structural crisis. The internal divisions in the West, the fragmentation of regional orders and the ascent of revisionist powers have cast doubt on the viability of the global liberal project. The internal vulnerabilities of the liberal order are apparent in the loss of normative legitimacy stemming from the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the differing Western stances taken on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which reflect double standards and imply that some lives are worth more than others, as well as in the increase in disagreements in transatlantic relations, particularly during Donald Trump’s second term of office (2025). This comes in addition to the US strategic pivot towards Asia.

The flourishing of revisionist powers is one of the main reasons for the current world (dis-)order. Revisionist powers were traditionally regarded as States that did not accept the status quo of the international order, arguing that their true weight was not reflected in the global system. Their goal is to alter the rules that define the legitimate behaviours of international actors and weaken the alliances designed to contain or moderate their ambitions, especially when they seek to impose their will on weaker actors. But as India’s former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon has pointed out, almost all the great powers now act in a revisionist way, hoping to modify the rules of the system: the US has partly withdrawn, distancing itself from institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and World Trade Organisation (WTO), ditching trade agreements and prioritising domestic policies in a sort of new Monroe Doctrine. China aspires to reordering the balance of power in Asia and increasing its global influence without yet offering a coherent ideological alternative. Russia, resenting its post-USSR loss of power, openly challenges the Western order with its invasion of Ukraine. Japan, Germany and India are also redefining their international roles, bolstering military capabilities or demanding greater representation. Menon stresses that there is growing disaffection among

developing countries towards the international system, perceived as unfair and ineffective.

The recent transformations in global governance suggest a multipolar scenario, characterised by a redistribution of power, a crisis of multilateralism and the conflicting coexistence of rival normative systems.

The liberal international order created, led and sustained by the US since the end of the Second World War no longer exists and nothing has emerged to replace it. In a recent article, the US analyst Kori Schake argues that Donald Trump's foreign policy is accelerating the end of the US-led international order. His perception of the country as an 'exhausted, weak and ruined' power is paradoxically combined with an overestimation of its coercive power. By withdrawing from multilateral cooperation –the historical source of US primacy– and replacing it with a unilateral and transactional strategy, Washington is eroding the conditions that underpinned its global leadership and is paving the way to an order that is more autonomous and hostile to its own interests.

The great powers lack a shared vision or leadership capable of offering stability. The result is a 'between-orders' system. It should be borne in mind that the new order is not predetermined, unlike its predecessors, which emerged after or during wartime: the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), the Versailles Treaty (1919), the Atlantic Charter (1941) and Bretton Woods (1944). This time, the new order is being negotiated in real time. In the context that has been set out, it is clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not the cause of the new world (dis)order but its consequence, although it is accelerating its reconfiguration.

1.1. The war in Ukraine, an example of the reconfiguration of the liberal international order

In his article 'Three worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order', published in January 2024, John Ikenberry argues that one of the main effects of the Russian war against Ukraine could be the impetus towards a tripartite configuration of the international system, structured around three spheres: the Global West, the Global East and the Global South. The first would be led by the US and the EU; the second by China and Russia and the third by a heterogeneous group of non-Western developing countries. These categories, which are more analytical than geopolitical, do not constitute coherent blocs, but illustrate the competition between models of order. Ikenberry analyses the rivalry between the US and China to shape

the future of the global system, but without considering the possibility of Washington abdicating its historical role as the ‘arsenal of democracy’ or the EU’s ability to sustain multilateralism and the liberal rules-based order. He does however highlight the growing protagonism of the Global South in the way the new world equilibrium is being formed, paying little attention to Russia except as a Euro-Asiatic ex-empire and a strategic partner of China in its efforts to undermine US hegemony.

The Kremlin and Russian analysts of international politics agree with Ikenberry however that ‘non-Western’ countries will be decisive actors in the future world order, although they prefer to call it the ‘world majority’ or ‘non-Western majority’, rather than the Global South. Moscow has turned the war in Ukraine into an essential element for remodelling this international order. Beyond the mere territorial conquest of a neighbouring State, its goal is to instal a multipolar world structured around spheres of influence led by ‘State-civilisations’ that challenge the West’s liberal and democratic principles. As Vladimir Putin has claimed, ‘the Ukraine crisis is not a territorial conflict; it is about the principles underlying the new international order’.[3]

1.2. The document’s main goals

This Policy Paper examines the notion of world majority as an imagined political community. It is not a question of an institutionalised alliance but rather a symbolic construct that brings together countries of the Global South and East that, from Moscow’s perspective, share the desire to rid themselves of Western domination. The world majority is an eminently political rather than empirical concept. The expression carries a threefold connotation: (a) ideological, by advancing an inclusive narrative that legitimises Russia’s isolation; (b) rhetorical, by transforming its status from ‘sanctioned minority’ to ‘emancipatory vanguard’; and (c) diplomatic, by justifying the search for flexible and pragmatic alliances with States that do not necessarily share an explicitly anti-Western agenda.

The main goals of this Policy Paper are:

- To analyse the concepts of the world majority and of Russia as a State-civilisation and their status as cornerstones of the new international order.

- To study the Russian perception of the BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) multilateral frameworks, presented as paradigmatic examples of the world majority and an expression of the convergence between different Euro-Asiatic State-civilisations.

3 Speech by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, during a meeting with senior staff at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow, 14/VI/2024, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1957107/?lang=es.

- To examine the concept of *setovaya diplomatiya* (network diplomacy) as a new instrument of Russian foreign policy in the context of the reconfiguration of the international order.

- To assess the geopolitical implications of the world majority concept for the international order, Europe and Spain.

To achieve these goals, it is worth noting that debates on foreign policy have intensified in official Russian circles since 2022. This dynamic reflects the extended perception among its political and academic elites that Russia has divided the international system into two blocs. On one side stands the coalition initially led by the US (during the Biden Administration) and currently by the EU, made up of several dozen countries that continue taking punitive steps to isolate and weaken Russia after its aggression against Ukraine. On the other side stands the rest of the world, more than a hundred States that maintain a neutral stance on the conflict, continue trading with Moscow and preserve their diplomatic contacts.

Taking Vladimir Putin's claim that 'the Ukraine crisis is not a territorial conflict; it is about the principles underlying the new international order' as a starting point, and given that the world majority notion has become a central theme of Russian foreign policy by crystallising its perception of the emerging order, it is necessary to scrutinise the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (CFP, 2023), as well as various speeches delivered by Putin himself and contributions from the country's most influential academics. All these materials reflect a discourse that is coordinated and aligned with the official Kremlin narrative.

Five representative texts drawn from this literature are examined here. The first document, published in Russian and English, titled *Russia's Policy Towards World Majority*,[4] is the most important for a number of reasons: it complements the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, it serves as a benchmark for other analysts, it is written by three prestigious foreign policy experts –Sergei Karaganov, Alexander Kramarenko and Dmitry Trenin– and it was commissioned by the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry in 2023. Four texts are written respectively by Ivan Timofeev (2023),[5] Fyodor Lukyanov (2023),[6] Fabian Melnichuk (2024)[7] and Ivan Safranchuk

4 S. Karaganov, A. Kramarenko & D. Trenin (2023), 'Russia's policy towards World Majority', Moscow, https://www.mid.ru/upload/medialibrary/c98/cjmfdf73760bme0y99zqllj51zzllrvs/Russia%E2%80%99s%20Policy.pdf.

5 I. Timofeev (2023), *Russia's Path to the 'World Majority*, Valdai Club, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-path-to-the-world-majority/.

6 F. Lukyanov (2023), 'Why the "World Majority" sees the Ukraine conflict as an example of declining european and North American power', *Russia in Global Affairs*, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/decline-european-american-power/.

7 F. Melnichuk (2024), *Мировое большинство: взгляд через призму неоднородности* (*World majority: a View Through the Prism of Heterogeneity*), Valdai Club, https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/mirovoe-bolshinstvo-cherez-prizmu-neodnorodnosti/.

(2024)[8] and they are included because they reveal a discursive consensus on the world majority that is coherent but pluralistic within strategic Russian thought and its outlook towards the Global South.

8 I. Safranchuk (2024), *Features of the ‘Global Majority’: Increasing Importance with Limited Subjectivity*, Valdai Club, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/features-of-the-global-majority/.

2. The world majority: an imagined political community

In the *New Diplomatic Dictionary*,[9] published by the Russian Federation Diplomatic School, the 'world majority' (*mirovoe bol'shinstvo*) is defined as the 'the totality of countries in the world that are not included in binding relations with the US or US-sponsored organisations; the totality of countries and peoples of the Global South and East, whose population is around 80-85% of the world's population'. The world majority is the opposite of the so-called 'collective West' (the US, the EU and NATO), although Russian analysts also use this term as the opposite of 'golden billion' (*zolotoy millyard*) to emphasise the privileges of wealthy Westerners.

In broad terms the world majority is identified with the concept of the Global South. There is a major difference between these two concepts, however. Whereas the Global South has economic and development connotations,[10] the world majority is a political and ideological concept and has a very specific strategic function: to create a collective identity of 'non-Westerners' to legitimise Russia's pretension of representing this majority.

Karaganov, Kramarenko and Trenin's document seeks to redefine Russia's international legitimacy after its rupture with the West, and contribute to the national cohesion of Russian society to accept its new role as 'the world vanguard' in terms of leading the change in the liberal international order. The three experts' proposals have a threefold function: (a) one strategic, advocating a sustained pivot towards Eurasia and the Global South; (b) another institutional, locating the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) at the heart of the new international order; and (c) another

9 *Новый дипломатический словарь* (*New Diplomatic Dictionary)*, http://diplomaticdictionary.com/dictionary/.

10 See, for example, I. Olivié, M. Esteban, C. de Esperanza Picardo & L. Fernández Rodríguez (2025), 'Hacia una reconfiguración de las relaciones con el *Global South*', Real Instituto Elcano, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/policy-paper/hacia-una-reconfiguracion-de-las-relaciones-con-el-sur-global/.

ideological, providing Russian foreign policy with a moral and civilisational basis. Taken as a whole, the text translates the Kremlin’s policy into the language of *Цивилизационный подход*[11] (‘a civilisational approach’), where Russia depicts itself as the vanguard of a global upheaval amid Western liberal hegemony. However, the authors concede that its success will depend on external factors –the evolution of the war in Ukraine, China’s stance and the cohesion of the BRICS– that could turn this moral leadership project into a strategy of mere survival. Russia is portrayed as the political, military and ideological nucleus of the non-Western majority, a State-civilisation that aspires to guiding the transition from the liberal international order towards the multipolar international order. The proposals are messianic and retain an echo of the Bolsheviks, whose goal was to turn the 1917 Russian Revolution into a worldwide revolution. Russia depicts itself as the guarantor of sovereignty for Global South nations, evoking, albeit with different language, the role played by the USSR in the Cold War. On the domestic stage, the narrative of historic destiny and resistance legitimises the economic and military costs of the war in Ukraine. The reorientation towards Asia and the Global South is thus presented as a structural transformation of national identity and not just a simple tactical shift: the definitive renunciation of the ‘European dream’.

If the three notable academics’ analysis is compared with the official *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*,[12] approved by presidential decree in 2023, it is clear that both documents converge on an underlying goal: transforming the liberal international order into a civilisational order regulated by sovereign States, where Russia acts as a mediator, guarantor and engine of integration, although differing in their degree of radicality. The CFP remains within the legal-diplomatic framework of the United Nations. *Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority* transcends this by conceiving of a new global system based on flexible alliances of the Global South and the creation of parallel institutions that gradually replace Western ones. Both texts reveal the civilisational, revisionist and de-Westernising pivot of Russia’s political and academic elite and the consolidation of a new post-liberal leadership discourse, where confrontation with the West ceases to be an incidental product of circumstances and becomes the Kremlin’s main strategy.

The world majority concept thus plays a central role in the new rhetorical architecture of Russia’s foreign policy. The document defines it, not as an anti-Western bloc, but rather as a plural space for sovereign civilisations that reject the universalisation of Western values. On this basis, the strategic goal consists not of direct confrontation but rather of building a polycentric order founded on cultural diversity, State sovereignty and global justice. In this arrangement, the BRICS+ and the SCO become the institutional nuclei of the new order, capable of setting norms, creating institutions and offering alternative international public goods.

11 *Новый дипломатический словарь, op. cit.*

12 Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Federation (2023), *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, nr 229, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/?lang=es.

Overall, the texts by the three experts closest to the Kremlin and the other texts show that, while all share structural criticisms of the Western liberal order and a call for civilisational pluralism, they differ in their interpretation of the nature, function and political viability of the world majority concept.

3. Russia as a State-civilisation

The debate about civilisations dates back a long way. Works such as those by Oswald Spengler,[13] published at the advent of the 20th century, or by Arnold J. Toynbee[14] during the Cold War, gave historical insights into the rise and fall of civilisations. More recently, Samuel P. Huntington's theory set out *in The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*[15] has become one of the most influential and debated interpretations of the post-Cold War world order. Huntington argues that, following the end of the ideological confrontation between capitalism and communism, the chief international conflicts of the 21st century would not be ideological or economic but cultural. His hypothesis posits that the world organises itself into great civilisations, understood as broad cultural communities with shared historical, religious and linguistic roots, and that the battle lines will be drawn up between them. Notable among the eight civilisations that he identifies is orthodox civilisation, centred on Russia and Eastern Europe, with its roots in Byzantium and Orthodox Christianity.

The Kremlin has adopted Huntington's definition, while broadening and adapting it to its concept of world majority. Article 4 of the 2023 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* refers to 'Russia's special position as an original State-civilisation, a vast Euro-Asiatic and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples who make up the cultural and civilisational community of the Russian world'.[16] The entries for *Цивилизация* (civilisation) and *Цивилизационный подход*[17] (civilisational approach) in the *New Diplomatic Dictionary* make the same point. According to the *Dictionary*, 'there is a special type of State, the State-civilisation, and it is characterised by: (a) the unification of various nations and peoples, as well

13 O. Spengler (1918-23), *The Decline of the West,* C.H. Beck, Munich.

14 A.J. Toynbee (1934), *Study of History*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, https://global.oup.com/academic/product/a-study-of-history-9780195050806?cc=es&lang=en&.

15 S.P. Huntington (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York

16 Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Federation (2023), *op. cit.*

17 *Новый дипломатический словарь, op. cit.*

as many creeds and even relatively autonomous sub-States within the shared borders of the national State; (b) interaction between many peoples based on the existence of a unifying language and a supranational culture; (c) location over vast geographical distances; and (d) the formation of a single system of values'. These characteristics also resonate with the idea of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) as a justification for the Kremlin's 're-imperialisation' policy, where compatriots –ethnic Russians who remained in the former Soviet republics– are used as its main instrument.[18]

According to the Dictionary, the 'civilisational approach is used to describe and study the multipolar world model. The increase in international instability in the 2020s is described as the collapse of the established world order, which is due to underestimating the development factor of civilisation, ignoring the contradictions caused by the variability of the civilising panorama and the values in the world, which led to the start of the historic transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order [...]. In the multipolar world model, the global decision-making centres are formed within civilisations: collective communities united by their participation in the same spiritual, historical, cultural, mental and symbolic tradition, whose members are aware of their affinity with each other, regardless of their national, class, political or ideological affiliation'.[19]

Although both definitions were updated in September 2025, the Kremlin's civilisational orientation has been manifest since 2012, dating back to Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency and the deterioration of relations with the West. Since then, Moscow has constructed an ideology that depicts Russia as a civilisation distinct from its Western counterpart, founded on traditional values, the central role of the State and a hierarchical conception of sovereignty. This framework legitimises defence of an alternative order based on the self-determination of civilisations and on non-interference. The shift is remarkable: Russia ceases to portray itself as a European country seeking to converge with the West, claiming instead a status as a distinct civilising pole. National identity is formulated as part of a Euro-Asiatic civilisation, heir to a tsarist imperial, Soviet and contemporary continuum, whose mission comprises acting as the kingpin and protector of this civilisational space.

The adoption of the State-civilisation model represents: the rejection of Western universalism –democracy, human rights and liberalism–; the justification of a hierarchical regional leadership, which is to say a region of influence where Russia claims the right to impose norms and to control its neighbours; strengthening the rhetoric of traditional values and the Orthodox-

18 See M. Milosevich-Juaristi (2016), *El proceso de 'reimperialización' de Russia, 2000-2016*, Working Paper, Real Instituto Elcano, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documento-de-trabajo/el-proceso-de-reimperializacion-de-Russia-2000-2016/.

19 On the subject of the civilisational approach, see Roscongress (2024), *Цивилизационный подход в модели многополярного мира: роль диалога культур (Civilisational approach in the multipolar world model: the role of dialogue between cultures*), https://roscongress.org/materials/tsivilizatsionnyy-podkhod-v-modeli-mnogopolyarnogo-mira-rol-dialoga-kultur/.

Slav identity, and a new rapprochement with other State-civilisations such as China, India and Iran.[20] These States share the claim of representing civilisations distinct from the West, with their own values and, to varying degrees, revisionist agendas amid the liberal international order. The State-civilisation narrative enables Russia to reject the liberal international order that emerged post-1991, advocate a world organised around spheres of influence, align itself with other revisionist actors that question Western hegemony and redefine institutions such as the SCO and the BRICS as platforms of the post-Western order.

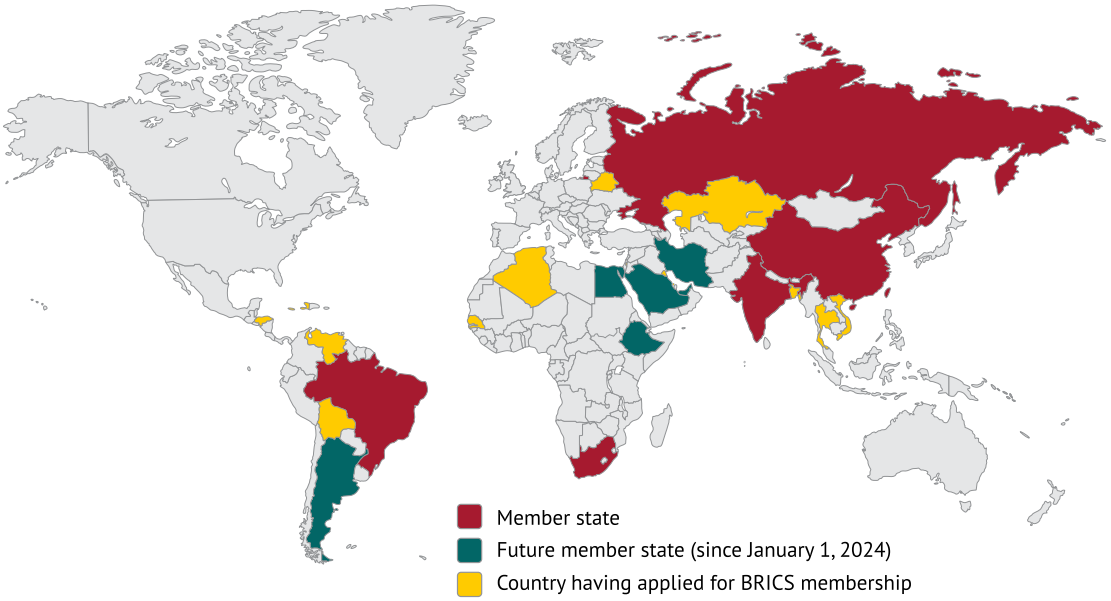
The State-civilisation concept seeks to legitimise a more plural, less universalist and more fragmented world order in which the West ceases to occupy an exclusive position as the originator of norms and power. It has become a fundamental doctrine of Russia's post-Western discourse, where geopolitical, civilisational and ideological elements intermingle. Its implications are manifold. First, it consolidates a structural shift in Russian diplomacy's centre of gravity away from Europe towards the Global South. Secondly, it establishes an alternative ideological framework to Western liberalism that combines sovereignty, tradition and civilisational plurality. Lastly, it conveys an image of Russia as a State-civilisation and military guarantor of the new multipolar order.

20 J. Mankoff (2024), 'The War in Ukraine and Russia's Quest to Reshape the World Order', *Survival*, vol. 66, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003498018-8/war-ukraine-russia-quest-reshape-world-order-jeffrey-mankoff.

4. The BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as the vanguard of the world majority

The vanguard of the world majority comprises the BRICS (Figure 1) and, to some extent, the SCO (Figure 2), with their potential for setting rules, fixing standards, applying policies and creating institutions that act as alternatives to Western ones.

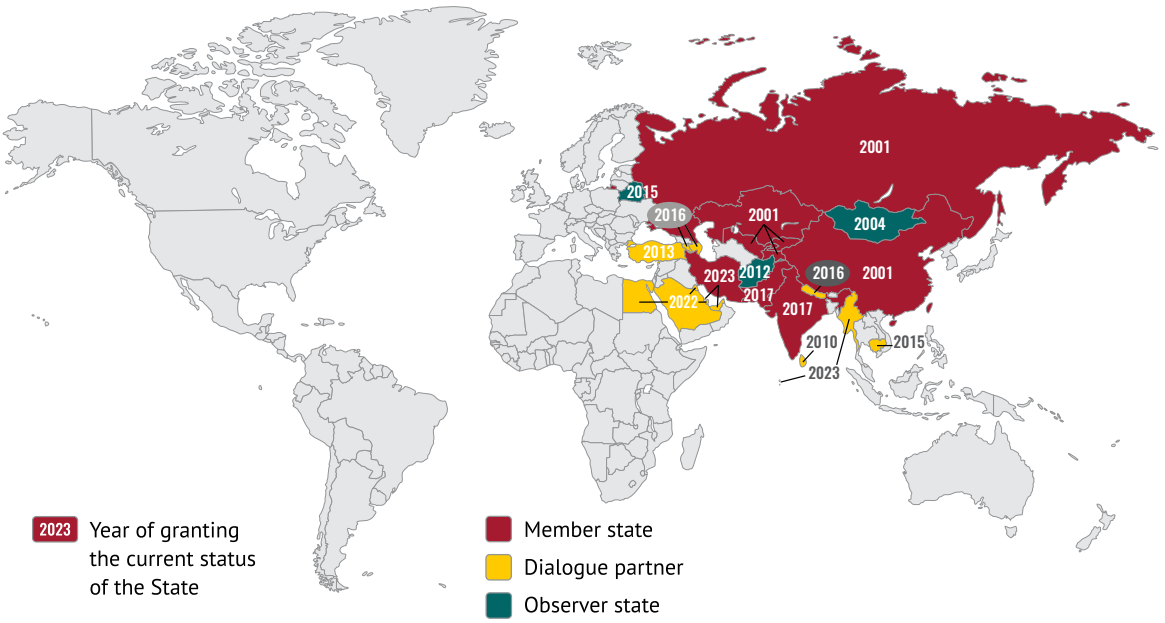
Figure 1
BRICS: present and future



Source: Russia's Policy Towards World Majority (Moscú, 2023).

The ‘world majority’: an imagined political community.

Figure 2
The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2023



Source: Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority (Moscú, 2023).

The interrelationship between the BRICS and the SCO constitutes the central axis of the Russian strategy to transform the international system on the basis of two complementary levels, according to Karaganov, Kramarenko & Tenin. Whereas the BRICS operate as a global platform designed to erode the normative hegemony of the West by creating alternative institutions that include financial mechanisms and technological standards, the SCO provides a continental architecture, charged with reorganising Eurasia on sovereignty and civilisational principles. The two frameworks do not compete with each other in Russian eyes, but instead form a laddered institutional ecosystem where the SCO consolidates the Euro-Asiatic nucleus of the new order and the BRICS extend its radius of global reach and enables the continental reconfiguration to translate into a broader redistribution of the power, norms and capacities of the international system.

5. The BRICS, a model of the 'post-Western' order

As is well known, the BRIC acronym was created in 2001 by Jim O'Neill to refer to emerging economies with high growth potential. Over time, the group acquired a political dimension, becoming a formal organisation in 2009. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), enlarged on 1 January 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (with Saudi Arabia as a participant), have become one of the key actors in the process of reconfiguring the liberal international order. According to the World Bank, with 35.6% of global GDP (global GDP at Purchasing Power Parity, PPP) and 45% of the global population, the enlarged bloc reflects the redistribution of economic and political power towards the Global South and challenges Western dominance.[21]

There is a broad literature regarding the main characteristics of the BRICS group.[22] Most authors argue that the BRICS face deep internal divisions that hinder their cohesion. China, India and Russia compete for leadership and pursue divergent strategic interests. China and India wage territorial rivalry in the Himalayas and maintain opposing positions on Pakistan. The new members also bring their own regional disputes, introducing new fault lines to the group. Joint projects, such as the New Development Bank founded in 2014, have had limited results. The idea of replacing the dollar with local currencies in internal trade has made little headway, because China does not provide the necessary institutional conditions for making the renminbi a global reserve currency.

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21 Funds Society (2024), *De China a India: la riqueza de los BRICS está cambiando el orden mundial*, Madrid, https://www.fundssociety.com/es/noticias/mercados/de-china-a-india-la-riqueza-de-los-brics-estan-cambiando-el-orden-mundial/.

22 See, for example, the following: J.S. Nye Jr (2025), *What Are the BRICS Good For?*, Project Syndicate, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/brics-china-russia-india-do-not-represent-global-south-and-have-own-rivalries-by-joseph-s-nye-2025-01; A. Gabuev & O. Stuenkel (2024), 'The Battle for the BRICS. Why the Future of the Bloc Will Shape Global Order', *Foreign Affairs*, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics; S. Patrick, E. Hogan, O. Stuenkel, A. Gabuev, A.J. Tellis, T. Zhao, G. de Carvalho, S. Gruzd, A. Hamzawy, E. Kebret, E. Noor, K. Sadjadpour, E. al-Ketbi, V. Mijares, O. Eguegu, A. Sager, G. Yabi, S. Ülgen & T. Nguyem (2025), *BRICS Expansion and the Future of World Order: Perspectives from Member States, Partners, and Aspirants*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/brics-expansion-and-the-future-of-world-order-perspectives-from-member-states-partners-and-aspirants?lang=en.

In the political realm, there is a tussle to assert the bloc’s identity. China and Russia want to turn the BRICS into an explicit alternative to the liberal Western order with an openly anti-Western stance. On the other hand, Brazil and India want to use the forum to reform the international system on the basis of pragmatic multipolarity, but without severing their ties to the West. Despite their diversity, the members share three common goals: (a) diversifying alliances and reducing their dependency on the US and the EU; (b) obtaining financing without political conditions and in local currencies; and (c) increasing their influence in global governance in support of the transition to a multipolar order. In their view, multipolarity constitutes the new structural framework of the international system and the BRICS are a useful instrument for moulding it. In practice, the bloc functions as a multipolarity laboratory reflecting the geopolitical tussle of the 21st century. The way it unfolds will demonstrate whether the Global South can redefine the international system without breaking it or whether the group will end up becoming a tool of confrontation under Russian and Chinese leadership.

Russia’s war against Ukraine has sped up the group’s political and ideological transformation. Although China and India have greater economic sway, Russia has taken on greater political leadership by taking advantage of the rotating presidency in 2024 and its capacity for mediation between Beijing and New Delhi. Moscow uses the forum to portray itself as the defender of the non-Western world and as an engine driving an alternative to the Western-dominated global order. The enlargement of the BRICS reflects this influence: it creates a coalition with authoritarian, conservative and anti-Western leanings more aligned to Russia’s strategic interests than to the global economic cooperation that underlay its original creation.

5.1. The Russian view of the BRICS+

There are 26 entries in the *New Diplomatic Dictionary* devoted to a range of concepts and declarations linked to the BRICS[23], providing evidence of their importance to Russian strategic thinking. In his 2024 speech Putin said that ‘the BRICS are attracting an increasing number of supporters and like-minded nations; States that share the fundamental principles that underpin its activities. These include sovereign equality, respect for the chosen path of development, mutual consideration of interests, openness, consensus, the aspiration to form a multipolar international order and a fair global financial and trade system, and the pursuit of collective solutions to the major challenges of our times’[24].

23 http://diplomaticdictionary.com/dictionary/.

24 Message delivered by Vladimir Putin at the launch of Russia’s presidency of the BRICS (Обращение Владимира Путина в связи с началом председательства России в БРИКС). http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73202.

From Russia's strategic viewpoint, the BRICS and their enlarged version, BRICS+, occupy a central role as cornerstones of the fledgling post-Western order. The Kremlin conceives of the BRICS as the organisational vanguard of the world majority, understood as the political and civilisational community encompassing countries that are not aligned with US leadership. This function is explicitly set out in *Russia's Policy Towards World Majority*, which refers to the BRICS as the driving force behind an alternative international project capable of formulating norms, creating its own institutions and undermining the architecture built by the West following World War II and the Cold War. According to this document, the consolidation of the BRICS reflects a structural shift in global power that is due both to their demographic and economic sway and to their increasing ability to supply international public goods.

From Moscow's perspective, the BRICS do not constitute a technical forum but rather an embryonic launchpad for a new international order. The insistence on the fact that the BRICS exceed the G7 in global output measured by purchasing power parity underlies a narrative that combines a geo-economic diagnosis and a civilising mission: the rise of the BRICS proves the loss of the West's ability to structure the global system. On this reading, the enlargement to BRICS+ is fundamental for creating an open and expansive architecture that connects regional non-Western organisations such as the SCO, the Eurasian Economic Union, Mercosur, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU). BRICS+ is described as a dynamic institutional network aimed at multiplying the poles of sovereignty and reducing financial, technological and normative dependency on a US- and EU-dominated system.

Russia's Policy Towards World Majority ascribes a particularly ambitious target to BRICS in the financial and monetary fields. Russia argues that the group could devise a common payments system equivalent to a new Bretton Woods that would enable countries of the world majority to escape the restrictions of the dollar and sanctions as a mechanism of political pressure. The same logic extends to other sectors: the BRICS could coordinate technical standards, certification mechanisms, cybersecurity policies and even media consortia capable of competing with the Western news ecosystem. This breadth reflects Russia's intention of using the BRICS as parallel infrastructure aimed at progressively replacing the regulatory frameworks underlying Western hegemony.

In rhetorical terms, the BRICS are portrayed as the vehicle enabling Russia's civilisational narrative to be put into effect. The group embodies the idea that cultural diversity and State sovereignty should steer the reorganisation of the international order. The enlargement to BRICS+ fulfils a twofold purpose: first, to show that the non-Western world has acquired sufficient critical mass to redefine globalisation and secondly to legitimise the role of Russia as the central player in this process by portraying it as a catalyst of alternative

diplomatic, financial and technological networks. In this regard, the Russian perception bestows an almost proto-organisational potential on the group. It is claimed that ‘the BRICS of tomorrow are the United Nations of the day after tomorrow’, a formula that does not entail replacing the United Nations but rather reforming its representative structure in the direction of a polycentric and civilisational model.

Russian protagonism faces structural limitations, however. The asymmetries between the members of the group, particularly China’s increasing economic primacy and India’s strategic autonomy, restrict Moscow’s ability to wield effective leadership. Despite this, the BRICS+, as they are also known, provide Russia with an indispensable platform for anchoring its aspiration to civilisational legitimacy: a venue where it can articulate its vision of the world majority as an imagined political community and as an alternative to the liberal international order.

Nevertheless, Russia’s role within the BRICS+ reflects the transition of its foreign policy away from structural revisionism towards the search for ideological legitimacy. The group has become the stage that enables Moscow to convey its narrative of international justice, to defend the autonomy of the Global South and to preserve its status as an indispensable power in the configuration of the emerging multipolar order.

6. The SCO and the Euro-Asiatic axis of the new international order

Russia's resurgence as a revisionist power has been accompanied by a conceptual reconfiguration of Eurasia, increasingly portrayed as its own civilisational space and as the nucleus of a renewed imperial project. From this viewpoint, Eurasia constitutes not only a geographical agglomeration but also the historical backdrop against which Moscow stakes its claim as a guarantor of order, a custodian of a distinctive political identity and the focal point of a community of States that shares affinities of culture, strategy or regime. In this context, Russia took part in setting up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the 1990s within the initial group of the Shanghai Five, comprising Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the basis of agreements aimed at building military trust and reducing armed forces in frontier zones..

The *New Diplomatic Dictionary* defines the SCO as 'a global organisation with interests that encompass Central, Eastern and Southern Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa [...] Its main aims are to strengthen trust and neighbourly relations, promote cooperation on matters involving regional peace and security, address new challenges and threats, instigate effective cooperation in multiple fields and foster economic, social and cultural development'.

According to the 2023 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 'Moscow's strategic purpose is to transform Eurasia into a unified continental space of peace, stability, mutual trust and prosperity'. To this end, it proposes a comprehensive overhaul of the SCO's role as a pillar of security in Eurasia, adjusting its operations to the new geopolitical realities and instituting the formation of a Greater Euro-Asiatic Association that harnesses the potential of all the continent's States and regional organisations, including the Eurasian Economic Union and the Association of South-East Asian Nations.

In *Russia’s Policy Towards the World Majority*, both the SCO and the BRICS+ are portrayed as fundamental elements in Russia’s strategy to remake the international order from Eurasia. On the geopolitical stage, the organisation gives Russia an instrument to counteract Western expansion and to consolidate its influence in central Asia, a region that Moscow deems an essential part of its historical domain. Its efforts in the realms of the fight against terrorism, border controls and energy security strengthen its presence in this immediate strategic vicinity. At the same time, the organisation enables NATO’s inroads to be halted and conveys an alternative security architecture based on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and consensus without the need to resort to formal military alliances.

Nevertheless, the SCO’s true potential rests in its capacity to integrate. For the Kremlin, the organisation constitutes the political nucleus of the new Euro-Asiatic order by uniting Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian states around a common stability and development agenda. This format matches the Russian ideal of a greater Eurasia, conceived as a geopolitical community capable of replacing the Euro-Atlantic axis with a continental convergence that connects eastern Europe with Asia. The admission of Iran as a full member in 2023 has strengthened its political importance and its status as a platform for powers that challenge the Western order, consolidating its role as the normative front ranged against liberalism. From the Russian perspective, the organisation fits into a broader vision where Eurasia acts as an incubator of alternative international norms and practices.

The organisation acquires complete sense when it is inserted into the State-civilisation rationale that Russia and China use as a framework for international legitimisation. The SCO functions as an institutional device that translates the civilisational perspective –according to which historical-cultural entities such as Russia, China and Iran are political civilisations with their own trajectories and values– into concrete governmental practices. Its flexible structure and its emphasis on State sovereignty enable these States to operate in a multilateral setting without accepting the liberal conditioning factors that characterise Western institutions. In this regard, the organisation acts as a forum where civilisational plurality is not only expressed but also normalised and practised.

7. Network diplomacy (*setovaya diplomatiya*) and flexible governance

According to the *New Diplomatic Dictionary*, network diplomacy (*setovaya diplomatiya*)[25] constitutes a category within the scope of the diplomatic practice of the current Russian Federation that coexists with other traditional models, forms and methods of diplomacy. Its distinctive feature is the use of a multi-level system of communication, both horizontal and vertical, between the various actors in the diplomatic system. This model relies on an integrated information-sharing space that facilitates interaction and data-exchange in periods that are very close to real time.

From a conceptual viewpoint, network diplomacy is structured into three interrelated subsystems. The first, of an informational nature, acts as a basic foundation for the whole. The second encompasses the institutional resources and instruments of a State's or an international organisation's diplomatic activities. The third includes elements and mechanisms appropriate to international cooperation.

Russia's Policy Towards the World Majority includes this notion as one of the defining elements of Russia's foreign policy in the period following the commencement of war in Ukraine. In a fragmented international setting and amid a highly heterogenous Global South, the text argues that Russian foreign policy should not rely on either rigid structures or formal alliances but rather on modular and flexible forms of cooperation that are geared towards specific interests.

25 Network diplomacy is not a Russian idea. The concept has been widely discussed by Western authors. See, for example, J. Heine (2013), 'From Club to Network Diplomacy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34361/chapter-abstract/291464827?redirectedFrom=fulltext; and J. Metzl (2001), Network Diplomacy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2001/04/network-diplomacy?lang=en.

Network diplomacy is thus portrayed as the necessary methodology for conducting relations with the world majority, understood not as a cohesive bloc but as a diverse group of States, civilisations and regional communities. According to the document, interaction in this space requires the use of ad hoc formats, temporary alliances, consensus-based coordination mechanisms and open platforms that can be joined and jettisoned depending on the specific goals in each case. This approach does not seek to replicate Western governance models but instead design a more decentralised, non-universalist international order that is adapted to civilisational plurality.

The notion of flexible governance, while not formulated explicitly, is implicit in this proposal to organise the world majority through network diplomacy, variables alliances, advanced regionalisation of the international system and rejection of hierarchical structures. The report suggests that the architecture of the emerging order should not rest either on permanent institutions or on normative frameworks that aspire to be universal, but rather on evolving and pragmatic mechanisms that reflect the needs, capabilities and cultural affinities of each group of countries. In this framework, polycentrism is defined as a structure arranged in a fluid way, in which the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other platforms operate as hubs and not as top-down organisations imposing from above.

8. Geopolitical implications for the international system, Europe and Spain

The war in Ukraine has accelerated the fragmentation of the international system and has consolidated the rupture between Russia and the West. Europe has embarked on an historic about-turn by decoupling itself from Russian hydrocarbons and moving towards greater levels of strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, Moscow has become more closely integrated into a bloc comprising China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. The conflict shows that is not just openly revisionist powers that question the liberal order; many countries in the Global South share the Russian conclusion that it is an excessively Western and unequal order. The outcome of the war will be decisive in the configuration of the new world order and will herald the end of the liberal cycle started in 1991.

8.1. Geopolitical implications for the EU and Spain

The rise of the discourse around the world majority and State-civilisations, together with enlargement of organisations such as the BRICS+ and the SCO, reflects Moscow's attempt, with the support of China, India and Iran, to redraw the map of global power. This project poses grave risks for Europe. The alternative civilisational order being put forward by Russia not only questions the West's normative hegemony, it also erodes Europe's geopolitical centrality by displacing the epicentre of world governance towards Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

The first impact for the EU is strategic and structural. The fragmentation of the liberal international order weakens the foundations of European foreign policy, historically based on the universalisation of values and on the primacy of normative multilateralism. The inroads made by the Russian civilisational paradigm, strengthened by the narrative of the collective West against the world majority, puts the EU on the defensive and obliges it to recast its legitimacy not as the centre of the global order but as one of its many poles.

The displacement of US leadership towards the Indo-Pacific accentuates Washington’s strategic autonomy and puts the EU in the position of having to construct its own capabilities of dissuasion, diplomacy and economic resilience. The EU can no longer assume that global equilibriums will take shape around its institutional model or normative power.

The second impact is economic and geostrategic. The consolidation of a diverse bloc of emerging powers that want to uncouple from the dollar, the regionalisation of value chains and the creation of alternative financial systems reduce the EU’s margin for manoeuvre in global economic governance. The energy, trade and technology networks being nurtured by the BRICS+ strengthen the autonomy of Asia and the Middle East, while the EU remains trapped between dependency on the US for security and dependency on Asia in the industrial and technological spheres.

On the political stage, such asymmetric multipolarity erodes the EU’s capability and influence in the Global South. The Russian narrative, bolstered by China and Iran, portrays itself in the discourse of emancipation, in contrast to Western neocolonialism, and as a more attractive model than the liberal European model, perceived as morally inconsistent and geopolitically subservient to Washington.

8.2. Specific risks for Spain

The implications for Spain are both regional and structural. In the immediate future, the bolstering of the Euro-Asiatic axis, especially cooperation between Russia, Iran and China, alters the balance in the Mediterranean and the Sahel, two areas of inordinate importance to Spanish security. The expansion of Russian influence in West Africa, combined with the Iranian presence in the Maghreb and the increasing Chinese involvement in infrastructure and telecoms, transforms the strategic environment in Europe’s southern neighbourhood.

Secondly, the world majority may weaken Spain and the EU's position in Latin America, a region where Moscow[26] and Beijing[27] are broadening their political, media and technological influence by means of post-Western cooperation projects. This displacement diminishes Spain's historical role as a cultural and political intermediary between Europe and Latin America.

26 M. Milosevich-Juaristi (2019), *Russia en América Latina: repercusiones para España*, Real Instituto Elcano, https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/dt02-2019-milosevichjuaristi-Russia-en-america-latina.pdf

27 M. Esteban (2015), *China en América Latina: repercusiones para España*, Real Instituto Elcano, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documento-de-trabajo/china-en-america-latina-repercusiones-para-espana/.

Recommendations

The challenge posed by the world majority is, for the time being, more narrative and symbolic than military and economic. Europe and Spain need to show that their political model continues being capable of generating legitimacy and cooperation in a plural world. The response to the civilisational order advocated by Russia cannot be based on a nostalgic defence of liberalism, but rather on its strategic renewal: a Europe that is less Eurocentric, more autonomous and capable of competing for global recognition through coherence, innovation and reciprocity.

Europe should acknowledge that multipolarity is not an ephemeral scenario but the structure of the new global order. There is a need to redefine strategic autonomy in a comprehensive, military, technological, energy and cognitive way, thereby contributing to more balanced transatlantic relations.

The EU and Spain need to counter the attraction of the world majority narrative by devising a less moralistic and more relational foreign policy based on reciprocity and shared interests. To this end it is worth pursuing: (a) associations with Africa and Latin America geared towards sustainable development, education and technological innovation; (b) a reformulation of cooperation policy that competes with that offered by the BRICS+ in the financing of infrastructure, prioritising institutional quality, environmental sustainability and the transfer of know-how; (c) support for reforming multilateral institutions to strengthen the representation of the Global South and reduce the scope for legitimacy exploited by Russia.

Spain, as a mid-ranking power aspiring to act as a bridge,[28] should: consolidate itself as a European champion of the Global South connecting the EU with Latin America, the Maghreb and West Africa; prioritise security in its southern flank through cooperation with Morocco, Algeria and the Sahel countries; devise a renewed Ibero-American strategy that harnesses the value of Spanish

28 L. Simón (2023), *¿Punta de lanza? España, Europa y la batalla por el sur global?*, Real Instituto Elcano, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/policy-paper/punta-de-lanza-espana-europa-y-la-batalla-por-el-sur-global/.

as a language of power and fosters technology and energy alliances in Latin America; and strengthen energy diversification by means of interconnections with North Africa that consolidate Spain as a gas and renewable energy hub in Europe.

The remaking of the international order requires a more anticipatory and multidimensional strategic intelligence. It is essential to fortify centres of analysis and public diplomacy capable of understanding the narratives of the Global South and counteracting Russian and Chinese disinformation; to foster training in strategic culture and comparative foreign policy, especially in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacic, and to orchestrate a structured Euro-Asiatic dialogue that enables the dynamics of the BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to be understood and, whenever possible, influenced from a realist and not a purely reactive perspective.

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Author

Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, Senior Fellow for Russia, Eurasia and the Balkans, Elcano Royal Institute.

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Real Instituto Elcano
Príncipe de Vergara, 51
28006 Madrid (Spain)
www.realinstitutoelcano.org

