

Task Force 1: Peace, Security and Global Governance



Russia, the Global South and Global Governance: Russia's Geostrategic Reorientation and Its Implications for the G7

Nicolò Fasola, Adjunct Professor, University of Bologna, Italy

Derek Averre, Senior Lecturer, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

Emerging fault-lines in the global landscape and Russia's geostrategic reorientation away from the West prompt a need to understand Moscow's foreign policy beyond war-fighting. Russia's bid to shape the political, economic and socio-cultural contours of a 'multipolar' order, exploiting the dissatisfaction of countries in the Global South (GS) with Western-led global governance, is still poorly understood. This policy brief aims to open up fresh perspectives by exploring the multi-faceted challenges arising from Russia's relations with the GS. The authors recommend that the G7 pays greater attention to the priorities of GS countries, while rethinking its own

messaging and intervention policies there. G7 nations should also foster relevant language/area expertise across their diplomatic and expert communities, engaging in the reform of multilateral institutions based on track 1.5/2 interaction with GS countries and, where possible, with Russia.

1. Russia in the evolving global order

1.1 The reorientation of Russia's foreign policy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented an era-defining shift in its relations with the West that is reverberating globally. Russia is seen by NATO states as the primary threat to transatlantic security (NATO 2022); in response, the Alliance is adapting its military instruments of power amid the unfolding "transformative worldwide scramble for the global commons" (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2024). The collective West is pursuing inter-institutional synergies to secure the "common objectives to the benefit of our one billion citizens" (European Union and NATO 2023); the EU's Global Gateway initiative "champions multilateralism and a rules-based global order" aimed at security and development partnerships with the Global South¹ (GS) countries (European Commission 2024).

Russia's policy too has acquired a more markedly global character. Moscow has stepped up its bid to maximise its influence in the GS, in line with the shift in its foreign policy priorities towards non-Western countries (Russia 2023). Moscow's intensifying efforts to forge political, trade and security relations with GS states go hand in hand with attempts to promote a positive image of Russia as a great power, ready to challenge Western policies and ideas, paying more attention to cultural and humanitarian issues. This is having a discernible impact on Russia's diplomatic presence overseas: 90 per cent of staff with country and language expertise have been reassigned to Foreign Ministry departments or embassies dealing with GS countries.

In engaging with the GS, Moscow leverages a potent anti-Western narrative, centred on two points of criticism. First, the West is said to promote 'neo-colonial' models of globalisation, exploiting the resources of non-Western countries, despite a shift in economic power towards the latter. Second, the West is accused of undermining the sovereignty of GS states, forcing them to accept neo-liberal ideological principles that run contrary to traditional spiritual and moral values (Rodkiewicz 2023). Moscow further emphasises the 'objective' historical processes of decline of the Western states, their isolationism and deepening internal divisions. By de-legitimising

¹ The term 'Global South' broadly encompasses Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and most of the Asia-Pacific – including China and India, but excluding Australia, Japan and South Korea. Rather than being a geographical term, it stands to indicate "a mix of political, geopolitical and economic commonalities between nations" that were subjected to imperialism and see themselves as distinct from 'the West' (Heine 2023).

Western-inspired policies, processes and rules, Moscow aims at expanding the ideological rift between the West and GS countries, attempting to influence them in favour of its revisionist policy agenda or, at a minimum, towards neutral/non-aligned positions.

Russia's global strategy is closely aligned with China's. President Xi's invitation to Vladimir Putin to attend the third One Belt One Road forum in October 2023, forcing Western leaders to stay away, highlighted the emerging fault-lines in the global landscape. The contest between Western liberal internationalism, promoting democratic values and individual rights and freedoms, and Russia's/China's sovereign internationalism – influencing non-Western countries towards a multipolar global order rooted in the traditional UN-centred norms that have underpinned the international system since 1945 – is a defining feature of the contemporary international environment (Zemánek 2023). Russia and China are also tightening their defence and security ties, through improved joint military/training exercises and capability development projects. Even though the Russia-China partnership is far from becoming a fully-fledged alliance, the two powers possess the collective intent and resources to challenge the West globally (Kim 2023).

Russia's actions are a symptom rather than a cause of a general crisis of multilateralism in the wider international system. UN Secretary General António Guterres has lamented the weakness of multilateral institutions, warning of “a great fracture in economic and financial systems and trade relations” and calling for “deep reforms” to the “dysfunctional, outdated and unjust [...] international financial architecture” that leaves many poorer countries in debt (UN Secretary-General 2023; Wintour 2023). The West's “liberal interventions” in the internal affairs of states have rarely led to positive outcomes (Freedman 2021); instead, they have prompted accusations of ‘double standards’ and diminished Western influence, leaving the way open for an increasingly assertive Russia and other authoritarian leaders. A collective system failure to address underlying problems in conflict-torn countries has fuelled civil unrest and emboldened violent non-state actors. While the US and its allies have enduring military partnerships with several leading GS states, the Western powers suffer from a credibility gap, underlined by the discrepancy between the material and moral resources committed to the Ukraine conflict and their lack of attention to challenges faced by the emerging nations (Islam 2023).

1.2 The increasing agency of the Global South

Russia's pivot to the GS responds to evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic trends. The increasing economic heft of the GS countries has been extensively documented. Forecasts suggest that, by 2030, the GS will comprise three of the four largest economies – China, India and Indonesia (Heine 2023) – representing what one expert calls the “power South”, an “engine of global growth”, as distinct from the “poor South” countries, which lag behind in terms of wealth and influence (Tocci 2023). The GDP of the BRICS group, which Russia and China favour enlarging further as a counterweight to the G7, already exceeds that of the latter in terms of purchasing power. Russia is also a leading member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which plays

an important role in securing trade routes. Although the BRICS and SCO remain either under-institutionalised or represent countries that have differing interests (notably China and India), both are expanding to take in new members or dialogue partners, mitigating the lack of effective global representation for the GS other than the G20. Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership and China's Global Security and Global Development Initiatives target at the emerging nations to promote an alternative security and development architecture (Ekman 2023). GS and Russian experts write about the coming of an 'Asian Century', in which Asia increasingly shapes global flows of trade, capital and innovation; Western writers talk of a "post-Western world" (Heine 2023; Lissovolik et al. 2021).

The greater agency of the emerging nations generates a more independent approach to international politics, as they pick and choose their partners depending on the issue at hand, while diversifying their trade and security alignments. As argued by one prominent Russian expert, these countries unite in a drive towards "full sovereignty [...] the desire and ability (due to their combined potential) to pursue independent foreign and domestic policy" (Lukyanov 2023: 7). As a result, Western arguments about the Russia-Ukraine conflict have made little impression on GS countries, due to their self-attributed identity as non-aligned, post-colonial nations; most of them maintain relations with Russia and reject the liberal reading of the war as democracy versus autocracy. GS states aim at collective problem-solving, seeking the reconstruction of the global political, economic and financial order through a new consensus at the UN and reform of the Western-led IMF and World Bank (Tisdall 2023). Consequently, they are receptive to Russia's professed commitment to a multipolar world order and the democratisation of an international system based on the sovereign equality of states, cultural diversity and traditional moral values, rejecting Western exceptionalism.

1.3 Russia, the West and the Global South

Western pre-eminence across the global commons is underpinned by the unrivalled military superiority of the US, its control of critical maritime routes, and a network of alliances and partnerships covering much of the developed world, bolstered by NATO's own capacity-building partnerships. This combines with the West's economic power and continuing influence over global financial structures. In this context, relations with Western states remain vital for many GS countries, so that they must accommodate them in peace talks over crucial issues such as Ukraine.

However, the West still faces mounting scepticism in the GS over many issues. Surveys have shown that Russia and China are currently more popular with Arab nations than the US, which is often perceived as a destabilising actor (Al-Sheikh 2023; Fusco 2021). While some countries in the Asia-Pacific region and Africa support specific Western positions, many of them maintain friendly and in some cases close relations with Russia. ASEAN countries condemned Russia's war on Ukraine in the UN – along with a majority of states – but this vote was aimed at validating

the group's self-image as “good global citizens”, rather than caving in to Western demands or breaking up with Russia and China (Rüland 2024).

Europe and America are often viewed in the GS “as forming part of a single West”, notwithstanding disagreements on how to manage the Russia challenge (Garton Ash et al. 2023: 15). The EU is criticised for pursuing transactional objectives such as stemming illegal migration, paying insufficient attention to reforming multilateral agencies, implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals and eliminating global inequalities (problems in accessing Covid-19 vaccines being one example). One authoritative European voice has argued that “Western democracies [...] have little credibility or normative appeal left to incentivize democratic reform elsewhere given the misfiring of their political systems at home [...] it has been clear for a number of years that the long-standing model of international democracy support has passed its sell-by date” (Youngs 2024: 1). Russian officials repeatedly echo these assessments to reinforce their messaging to the GS countries, whose purported neutrality is already tilting towards Moscow.

At the same time, Russia's and China's claims to support the GS countries are problematic. Some analysts suggest that China is reproducing a colonial approach, deploying economic tools for political gain with corrupt and autocratic leaderships, and that Russia is exploiting the mineral wealth of African countries through use of proxy armed forces in support of authoritarian governments. Moscow and Beijing seek to exercise leadership in the BRICS group, raising fears among its other members that it may become an anti-Western platform (Stuenkel 2023). Moreover, though Russia-Ukraine politics is largely peripheral for GS countries, many of them are worried about the strategic implications of a Russia-West confrontation. The fall-out from the conflict has already contributed to instability, exacerbating food and energy shortfalls and disrupting global supply chains, potentially leading to crises of governmental legitimacy in the GS. Moscow' policies have not yet alienated developing countries, but some face serious economic consequences and seek a resolution of the war.

Against this backdrop, Moscow targets its economic policies towards supplying GS countries with grain/fertiliser exports, promoting its civilian nuclear materials and technologies, and infrastructure development in trade corridors linking GS countries to Russia, Eurasia and the north. Security policies are directed at boosting arms trade and military-technical cooperation, including imports of *matériel* required for Russia's war effort, as well as defence/security capacity-building, deployment of combat troops (likely to continue after the demise of the Wagner Group) and military support to incumbent governments to combat domestic unrest and terrorism. The perception remains across the GS that Beijing offers regional trade and infrastructure projects that can more effectively transform economies through connectivity of critical supply chains, offsetting the shortfall in debt relief by Western lenders (Modern Diplomacy 2023a). ‘De-dollarization’ – reducing dependence on the Western-dominated financial superstructure and avoiding the threat of secondary sanctions by switching to trade and investment in national currencies, including through the BRICS New Development Bank – may also reshape geopolitical

alliances and economic diplomacy within international institutions of governance (Modern Diplomacy 2023b).

2. The role of the G7

2.1 Key challenges

As outlined above, the structural and normative power implications of Russia's and China's regional assertiveness have generated a multifaceted Western response, centred institutionally on NATO – still heavily reliant on the US – and the EU. Yet both have struggled to entrench partnerships with most GS countries. Given the diverse political, security, economic and development nature of current global policy challenges, the G7 group – given its standing, flexibility and global nature – is better placed to provide leadership and develop cooperation/integration mechanisms between the Global North and South. Biden has called the G7 “the steering committee of the free world”, in which a liberal democratic West contends with an authoritarian and mercantile East led by China and Russia (Tisdall 2023). But in order to shape the evolving international environment effectively, the G7 should not be captured by the polarising narratives emanating from Western capitals but should do more to understand the concerns of the GS countries.

The Italian presidency's stated G7 priorities are promoting stability in the Mediterranean, Balkans and Africa, tackling migration and development, reinforcing relationships with global actors (particularly in the Asia-Pacific region) and upholding rules-based international trade. Strengthening interaction with G20 is also under consideration. While the Russia-Ukraine war and, more recently the Israel-Iran conflict, has seemed to be monopolising the group's attention, it was encouraging to see emphasis in the G7 Italy 2024 Foreign Ministers' Statement on fostering partnerships to address global challenges (G7 2024), building on the agenda outlined in the G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué. How can the Italian presidency sustain the impetus towards a truly global agenda and provide effective leadership in partnership with GS nations? Three main challenges arise.

First, there is a normative challenge. Western exhortations to GS leaders to fall into line with a poorly defined 'rules-based order' – however desirable as a basis for cooperative multilateral global partnerships – appear self-serving and breed mistrust over double standards. The West's self-proclaimed standing as a beacon of democracy clashes markedly with a tendency to cosy up to undemocratic leaderships, undermining the narrative of democracy versus autocracy and arousing suspicion about Western intentions (Tsuruoka 2022). In the context of persistent Russian information offensives about Western 'neo-colonialism' across the GS, inconsistencies between the West's verbal commitments and practical actions – the Israeli response in Gaza to the atrocities committed by Hamas being a case in point – must be addressed in order to maximise its strategic advantages in tackling regional issues and forging multilateral coalitions.

As one expert argues, “The normative power that the liberal international order as a vision can hold in a multiplex world depends on the West’s consistent adherence to the postwar edifice of principles, rules and institutions of international law [...] without which the West loses its interaction capacity” (Huber 2024: 8).

The second challenge is geopolitical. Western global efforts to secure strategic sea routes, transregional supply chains and energy provision, as well as negotiating security agreements, often appear motivated by lining up the GS countries against Russia and China. Yet this strategy presents more problems than solutions. The threat of secondary sanctions, investment bans, and asset seizures on countries ignoring US/European sanctions on Russia has had an effect, but not a critical one, with a substantial majority of GS countries reluctant to restrict trade with Russia (Seshadri 2023). While the West seeks to marginalise Russia, Moscow’s initiatives, albeit sometimes vague and unrealistic – for example, proposals for a pact for collective security in the Gulf and West Asia (Mamedov 2023) – open up alternatives to US strategies. Russia’s involvement in OPEC+ arrangements has contributed to improving relations with the Gulf Arab states, notwithstanding Moscow’s close partnership with Iran. China also has a greater mediation in the Middle East due to trade and energy links, as a recent deal facilitated between Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrated. And while Russia’s Eurasian connectivity projects cannot compete with China’s in terms of attractiveness, the two actors have shown willingness to coordinate their respective designs and reduce the potential for bilateral tensions (Silvan and Kaczmarek 2023).

The third challenge is both conceptual and practical. The GS countries face the momentous task of dealing with the demands of powerful international actors while addressing transnational challenges and preserving their sovereignty, in what promises to be a chaotic and confusing process of transition to a restructured global order. Governments struggle to form political coalitions, choose security partnerships and navigate complex trade and financial/investment arrangements to secure development, while satisfying the demands of civil society to maintain their own domestic legitimacy. But the conception of a Global North associated with modernity, development and prosperity, set alongside a Global South positioned on the margins of neoliberal globalisation and lacking competence, is not only problematic from a moral standpoint but also leads to flawed Western assumptions about the capabilities and innovation potential existing in those countries – the underestimated African expertise over the Covid-19 pandemic response being a case in point (Prys-Hansen 2023).

These challenges coalesce to generate divergent perspectives on re-ordering global politics. A recent authoritative study concludes that, for many in the non-Western world, the war in Ukraine “has done less to redefine the world order than to set it further adrift, raising new questions about how urgent transnational challenges can be met”. The GS countries see “fragmentation into a multipolar world [and] a wide gap between the West and the ‘rest’” (Garton Ash et al. 2023: 2), with differing understandings of the Ukraine war; in an increasingly fractured, non-hegemonic world system, the emerging regional powers want to assert their sovereign decision-making

agency, including maintaining good relations with Russia: “In our view, the West would be well advised to treat India, Turkiye, Brazil, and other comparable powers as new sovereign subjects of world history rather than as objects to be dragooned onto the right side of history” (Garton Ash et al. 2023: 16). The GS powers have their own strategic visions, albeit contested domestically and producing differentiated responses to key global issues, which both the West and Russia must take into consideration as the new global landscape is formed.

Recommendations

The G7 advanced nations’ response to challenges posed by Russia’s geostrategic reorientation towards the GS will require fresh perspectives and strategies, transcending outdated dichotomies between democracy and autocracy, North and South to foster a comprehensive global multilateral agenda. We offer the Italian G7 presidency the following suggestions.

- The Western powers’ emphasis on shaping the international order based on vaguely defined rules and liberal values needs to be recalibrated by paying more attention to the priorities of non-Western countries. The mere demonization of Russian narratives and actions is no recipe for success; Western interests are better served by positive approaches, negotiating international rules and standards with the GS and demonstrating their competitiveness vis-à-vis Russian alternatives.
- Partnerships with the GS, both regional and bilateral, should transform vestigial patron-client frameworks into non-hierarchical relationships, recognising the collective potential of the emerging nations. This approach should feed into conceptual policy frameworks for the reform of global institutions and international efforts to mitigate inequalities.
- US/European political-military and humanitarian interventions in non-Western countries require closer coordination and consistency, drawing a dividing line with Russia’s own interventions, which have attracted criticism for violating the laws of war and promoting authoritarian approaches to conflict management.
- While recognising the fraught nature of the Western powers’ relations with Russia and China, the G7 should steer clear of binary thinking and seek to identify their positions and policies that merit constructive engagement. Selective engagement with Russian officials could help with tackling global problems, from instability in the Middle East to the spread of militant Islamism, and from pandemic preparedness to innovation and development.
- The G7 should respond to Russia’s growing diplomatic presence overseas by increasing the quantity and quality of language/area expertise of diplomats deployed in GS countries and improving interactions between them. This also applies to Russian language/area expertise, which has suffered from gross neglect and underfunding across the West since the 1990s.
- Academic and expert communities from both the GS and Russia should be enlisted to convey to Western audiences the underlying political thinking in their countries, working within an ongoing framework of track 1.5 or track 2 interaction. These engagements should aim to support comprehensive confidence-building and reform processes within multilateral institutions, enhancing the re-ordering of international politics.

References

- Al-Sheikh, Walid. 2023. The Arab world tilts eastward. *Sada* 27 June. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90045>
- Ekman, Alice. 2023. China's global security initiative. *EUISS Briefs* 5. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2950>
- European Commission. 2024. *Policies*. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/1280_en
- European Union and NATO. 2023. *Joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_210549.htm
- Freedman, Lawrence. 2021. The crisis of liberalism and the Western alliance. *Survival* 63(6): 37-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.2006450>
- Fusco, Flavia. 2021. Countering zero-sum relations in the Middle East: Insights from the expert survey. *Documenti IAI* 21|02. <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12647>
- G7. 2024. *Foreign ministers' meeting communiqué: Addressing global challenges, fostering partnerships*. 19 April. <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/foreign/240419-global-challenges.html>
- Garton Ash, Timothy, Krastev, Ivan, and Leonard, Mark. 2023. United West, divided from the rest: Global public opinion one year into Russia's war on Ukraine. *ECFR Policy Briefs* February. <https://ecfr.eu/?p=101735>
- Heine, Jorge. 2023. The Global South is on the rise – but what exactly is the Global South? *The Conversation* 3 July. <https://theconversation.com/the-global-south-is-on-the-rise-but-what-exactly-is-the-global-south-207959>
- Huber, Daniela. 2024. Israel/Palestine and the normative power of the 'Global South'. *IAI Commentaries* 24|14. <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18255>
- Islam, Shada. 2023. The Global South is a geopolitical reality. *Internationale Politik Quarterly* 3/2023. <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/node/38991>
- Kim, Patricia M. 2023. The limits of the no-limits partnership. *Foreign Affairs* 102(2): 94-105. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1129878>

Lissovolik, Yaroslav, Mok, Andy, and Stepanova, Anastasia. 2021. The platform world: From corporates to regions. *Valdai Discussion Club Reports* June. <https://valdaiclub.com/files/34811>

Lukyanov, Fyodor A. 2023. Not against, but beyond the West. *Russia in Global Affairs* 21(4): 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-4-5-8>

Mamedov, Ruslan. 2023. Collective security in the Gulf and West Asia. *Modern Diplomacy* 12 July. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/?p=64625>

Modern Diplomacy. 2023a. The Economist: What non-alignment really means. *Modern Diplomacy* 22 June. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/?p=63502>

Modern Diplomacy. 2023b. National Interest: Five major trends illustrate how the World is changing. *Modern Diplomacy* 16 June. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/?p=63304>

NATO. 2022. *NATO 2022 strategic concept*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm

NATO Allied Command Transformation. 2024. *The scramble for the global commons in the next security era*. 2 February. <https://www.act.nato.int/?p=9216>

Prys-Hansen, Miriam. 2023. The Global South: A problematic term. *Internationale Politik Quarterly* 3/2023. <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/node/38983>

Rodkiewicz, Witold. 2023. An anti-colonial alliance with the Global South: The new 'foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation'. *OSW Commentaries* 506. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/31419>

Rüland, Jürgen. 2024. ASEAN, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the politics of pragmatism. *International Affairs* 100(1): 385-406. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia286>

Russia. 2023. *The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation*. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586

Seshadri, Chandana. 2023. Western sanctions on Russia and the Global South's stance. *RUSI Commentaries* 23 November. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/western-sanctions-russia-and-global-souths-stance>

Silvan, Kristiina, and Kaczmarek, Marcin. 2023. Russia's approach to connectivity in Asia: From cooperation to coercion. *East Asia* 40(3): 317-334. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-023-09404-w>

Stuenkel, Oliver. 2023. BRICS invitation puts Argentina in a tough spot. *Foreign Policy* 21 September. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/21/brics-membership-argentina-china-russia-brazil-india-elections>

Tisdall, Simon. 2023. Who wants to rule the world? I will, says Joe. No, it'll be me, says Xi. *The Observer* 23 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pvq92>

Tocci, Nathalie. 2023. War in Ukraine is revealing a new global order – and the ‘power south’ is the winner. *The Guardian* 20 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/p/zppz3>

Tsuruoka, Michito. 2022. Why the war in Ukraine is not about democracy versus authoritarianism. *RUSI Commentaries* 27 June. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-war-ukraine-not-about-democracy-versus-authoritarianism>

UN Secretary-General. 2023. *Secretary-General's address to the General Assembly*. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/267589>

Wintour, Patrick. 2023. World inching ever closer to a great fracture, says UN chief. *The Guardian* 19 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pvbec>

Youngs, Richard. 2024. The defensive turn in EU democracy support. *Carnegie Papers* March. <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/91946>

Zemánek, Ladislav. 2023. The rise of liberal authoritarianism and global transition to polycentrism. *Russia in Global Affairs* 21(3): 84-102. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-3-84-102>

About Think7

Think7 (T7) is the official think tank engagement group of the Group of 7 (G7). It provides research-based policy recommendations for G7 countries and partners. The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) are the co-chairs of T7 under Italy's 2024 G7 presidency.