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Non-Western multilateralism: BRICS and the SCO in the post-Covid world

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BRICS and the SCO are a graphic embodiment of Russian and Indian equidistant partnerships with other non-Western power centres, which is fundamental for the two countries' positioning as independent great powers refraining from joining the US-China confrontation as junior partners of either superpower.



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The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated many international processes and aggravated antagonisms. First and foremost, the so-called “liberal international order,” which primarily relied on the power and financial and economic superiority of the United States, has continued to lose strength. This order has never been universal and in recent years has faced a growing resistance both from without — from the outside forces that were unwilling to accept America’s global leadership — and from within, from the part of US society that did not benefit from globalisation and did not subscribe to the United States’ role as a “benevolent hegemon” and chief creator of global public welfare.

This process has dramatically accelerated amid the pandemic. The United States has kept completely away from organising cooperation against this year’s main transnational threat. More than that, it started playing havoc with this cooperation (by withdrawing from the WHO, for example) and has often acted contrary to the best interests of its closest allies and partners. The United States has boosted pressure on allies, coercing them into opposition to Russia and China and even introducing sanctions against those unwilling to renounce cooperation with Moscow and Beijing (on Nord Stream 2, for example).

A stronger US-China confrontation has failed to lead to the slackening of US-Russia confrontation.

Similarly, the pandemic has become a catalyst for a US-China standoff, which has escalated into a full-blown confrontation in 2020. The confrontation will continue regardless of the outcome of the US presidential election in November and will remain central to the US foreign policy and a key factor in relations with allies for years to come. There is a bipartisan consensus on this point, and should Biden win in November, the Republicans will watch his policy towards Beijing as closely and jealously as the Democrats are watching Trump’s policy with regard to Moscow today. Apart from being involved in the political, military-political, information and ideological confrontation, the US and China have geared up their economic disengagement, a gradual and slow, if steady, minimisation of their economic relations and interdependence. This has received the support of a considerable part of the US business community.

But a stronger US-China confrontation has failed to lead to the slackening of US-Russia confrontation. Within the next few years, Washington will go on with its policy of two-pronged containment of Beijing and Moscow, no matter who wins the presidential election in the United States. For its discontinuation, there are no domestic political conditions in the United States; nor is there a realisation by the US establishment that Russia will not begin to regard China as a threat in the foreseeable future and will not realign itself with the West on that account. Moreover, if Biden wins, the confrontation with Russia and China may even be intensified. The US will step up its criticism of them over values and its coordination with allies in Europe and Asia. The sanctions policy towards Russia and China will continue as well, including to the detriment of US allies’ interests.

An increasing number of countries tend to prefer unilateral steps, thereby boosting the chaos and risk of conflict in the international environment as a whole.

The weakening of the liberal world order, the United States’ intensified confrontation with China and Russia, as well as the pandemic as a whole, which is being dealt with primarily at the national level and has aggravated internal differences in many countries, have eroded the overall multilateralism of international

politics. An increasing number of countries tend to prefer unilateral steps, thereby boosting the chaos and risk of conflict in the international environment as a whole. The same trends have led to a dramatic weakening of global governance and the spiralling pandemic is the best illustration of this point. Other global and transnational problems are not addressed either, or if they are, the effort is insufficient. Such issues include climate change, environmental degradation, international terrorism, and others. The United States' confrontation with China and Russia and the general tendency towards self-interest in politics in many countries have actually paralysed effective cooperation in the fight against common challenges. An indicative fact is the paralysis or inefficiency of once key global governance tools, such as the G20 and G7.

At the same time, the trend of increasing one-sidedness in the behaviour of states has also a "bright side" in that there is a greater demand for state sovereignty and independence, with the world growing more chaotic and less governable.

China's successes in combating COVID-19 at home, the aid it rendered to others, greater assertiveness of its foreign policy and the confrontational policies conducted by the United States have combined to accelerate the emergence of a world where two power centres — the United States and China — are much stronger than all the others.

Yet another trend that has been accelerated by the pandemic is the greater vigour and self-assertiveness in China's foreign policy. The PRC is clearly demonstrating its qualities as a leader and a great power. Deng Xiaoping's tradition of modesty and concealment of China's might on the international arena is a thing of the past. The new line of behaviour is, in all evidence, a long-term affair and stems from both the system-wide (confrontation with the United States, adaptation to the role of a great power) and domestic (a surge of nationalism) factors. Among other things, this line has manifested itself in a tougher approach to certain neighbours, resulting indirectly in a recent flare-up of the Chinese-Indian border conflict and the failure of yet another PRC-India attempt to consolidate partner relations. Rivalry is still the prevailing aspect of the two countries' bilateral relations. This is certainly having a negative impact on the viability of BRICS and the SCO.

China's successes in combating COVID-19 at home (particularly against the background of unsuccessful efforts in other countries), the aid it rendered to others (again, against the background of the US failure to provide the same kind of aid), greater assertiveness of its foreign policy and the confrontational policies conducted by the United States have combined to accelerate the emergence of a world where two power centres — the United States and China — are much stronger than all the others. The emerging world is that of two superpowers locked in a system-wide conflict with each other. This does not mean that we will see bipolarity like the one that existed in the latter half of the 20th century. There is no China-controlled bloc, nor is it likely to be formed. The US bloc is growing weaker and getting transformed into something more heterogeneous, with ever more countries unwilling to take sides or make the either-or choice. Nevertheless, the rest, including Russia, should adapt to the new environment and rethink their positioning in a two-superpower world, especially as the United States (and later possibly China) will bring pressure to bear on New Delhi and Moscow, compelling them to side with one of them in the context of the US-China confrontation.

These trends are having a mixed impact on BRICS and the SCO.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a new profound global economic crisis. Emerging from it will be a protracted affair, given the emasculation of global governance, increased self-interest in the policies of many countries, and the gradual economic disengagement of the United States and China. This will deal a painful blow to all world economic centres, including the United States and China, which are already facing massive internal problems. The pressure of these problems on US and PRC governments will only grow within the next few years, something that will make their foreign policies even more impulsive.

All these trends are having a mixed impact on BRICS and the SCO. Currently, this influence is certainly negative, but it is also increasing their robustness, importance and long-term potential. Both associations tend to focus on common interests rather than geopolitical antagonisms and differences and have amassed much experience in this sense. And yet some of the above tendencies have introduced a certain tension in BRICS and SCO operations. In the first place, this has to do with the aggravated China-India conflict. But the same circumstance is simultaneously a sign of robustness and maturity, because both groups remain viable despite the direct confrontation between the two countries. The greater Chinese foreign policy assertiveness has also proved a robustness test for the SCO. For now, it can be said that it has stood the test.

Unlike the G7, the BRICS countries are not attempting to oppose each other directly in this matter, nor do they seek to artificially politicise it.

Both groups will also withstand the possible increase in US pressure on India and Brazil to the extent of the United States' increasingly intense confrontation with China. First, New Delhi is unlikely to renounce its strategic independence and become a component of the US-China containment coalition. Second, the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil was also a stress test of sorts and it was passed with flying colours. Despite Bolsonaro's China baiting during the election campaign and his desire to draw closer to the United States, his country did not withdraw from BRICS and continues what is on the whole constructive cooperation within the Five.

Finally, a dialogue and cooperation on combating COVID-19 have been re-established within BRICS after a certain pause caused by the initial shock from the pandemic and the natural desire to launch a war on it at the national level. Unlike the G7, the BRICS countries are not attempting to oppose each other directly in this matter, nor do they seek to artificially politicise it. Cooperation within BRICS becomes particularly important in a situation where the pandemic has assumed a menacing scale in Brazil.

Beijing's ability or desire to play the hegemon within these institutions — BRICS and SCO — is nil.

Strategically, the demand for BRICS and the SCO in the post-COVID world and their importance for Russian and Indian foreign policies will only grow. Given the withering away of the former international order and the general weakening of multilateralism, these associations will play an increasingly important role as a bulwark of a new post-Western and polycentric world order, where multilateralism and global governance will no longer be associated with the Western institutions alone. As of today, BRICS and the SCO are the most successful and influential models of non-Western multilateralism, with non-Western power centres cooperating on common issues and coordinating their positions on crucial international problems in the absence of a clearly defined hegemon. Beijing's ability or desire to play the hegemon within these institutions is nil.

Therefore, it makes sense to regard BRICS as a full-fledged institution of global governance designed to fill

the vacuum of cooperation on transnational challenges at the global level. For this to be so, BRICS should not only encourage Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa to cooperate among themselves but also, increasingly, induce the Five to dialogue about the world as a whole. It should come up with its own proposals on transnational problems, such as improvements in the global environmental situation, climate change, pandemics, international terrorism and international organised crime, international information security, and others. New rules and regimes should be devised in their regard and promoted at the global level. It is BRICS that could propose, for example, a fairer regime to fight climate change and environmental degradation, under which payments for environmental damage should come not only from producers but also from consumers of “dirty” products, the majority of whom are concentrated in developed countries. In addition, the Five could declare that they are stepping up support for the WHO and even increase their contributions to it. They could also announce measures to prevent possible future pandemics and make responses to them more effective.

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To fill the vacuum of global governance and become a pillar of the new polycentric world order, BRICS must under no circumstances get involved in the US-China confrontation or pose as an antithesis to the G7 and Western institutions as a whole. Insofar as some BRICS members are opponents and others partners of the United States, the likelihood of such involvement is negligible, especially since it would immediately paralyse the Five. By staying above the new global fray and suggesting new rules and regimes for counteracting transnational challenges, BRICS will help to moderate the fray and prevent the emergence of new Cold War blocs and the general polarisation into “USA+” and “China+”.

It is important to understand in this context that a limited number of great powers are no longer able to govern the world effectively. This is realised by a growing number of regional actors that seek to play an active and independent role in global affairs rather than follow in the wake of this or that global power. Therefore, BRICS must become a stronger player, with dialogue formats with third countries — outreach and BRICS+ — institutionalised. The latter should be aimed at collaborating closely with non-Western states that are not BRICS members, supporting the idea of a fairer polycentric world order and contributing to resolving transnational problems.

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It is advisable for the SCO to be positioned as a leading international organisation and the foundation of a Greater Eurasia regional international order, given that Eurasia is still the only region of the world developing without a hegemon, either external and internal. In fact, the SCO’s existence with Russia and India as members both weakens US influence and presence in the region and rules out a regional hegemony of China. The SCO should persevere its policy of fighting separatism, extremism and terrorism, especially given that the gravity of these challenges will only grow against the background of expanding international conflicts, US confrontational policies, and the global economic crisis. It is worthwhile to add to this list the fight against pandemics and environmental degradation at the regional level. The interconnection of these two threats is obvious and they are of immediate interest for all SCO members.

Finally, the SCO should prioritise stabilisation in Afghanistan for years to come. It is clear that the United States and NATO have failed in their attempts to stabilise that country. It is also clear that Washington, no

matter who wins the presidential contest in November, will seek to scale down its operations and reduce its presence to a geopolitical minimum. It is the regional countries, each of which is either a member or observer of the SCO, that should play the principal role in ensuring stability, political settlement and development in Afghanistan.

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Yet another reason why BRICS and the SCO will have growing importance for Russia and India in the coming years is the need for them to adapt to China's gradual emergence as the second superpower and carry out its "mild taming." The wider the gap between China and other power centres aside from the United States in terms of total power potential and the more intense the US-China confrontation, the more important it will be for Russia and India to pursue a well-balanced foreign policy, maintain close partnerships with other power centres, and strengthen the multilateral institutions involving themselves and China. There are no better formats for that than BRICS and the SCO. Their strengthening will make it possible not only to weaken the threat of a new global split into opposing blocs but also to reduce the risk of the PRC implementing a hegemonic policy. China's might will be tamed as it gets enveloped in multilateral formats and regimes similarly to the way German might is tamed by EU institutions. BRICS and the SCO are a graphic embodiment of Russian and Indian equidistant partnerships with other non-Western power centres, which is fundamental for the two countries' positioning as independent great powers refraining from joining the US-China confrontation as junior partners of either superpower.

Finally, the new economic crisis, the economic "disengagement" of the United States and China, and America's long-term policy of double-pronged containment of China and Russia are boosting the importance of closer BRICS cooperation on global economic governance. Specifically, it would do well to reduce its dependence on US-controlled economic institutions and tools. Gaining in significance is the elimination of the US dollar as the commercial payable and receivable in deals that BRICS countries have with each other and third countries (this is yet another task for BRICS+) and the development of mechanisms reducing the negative impact of US sanctions on economic relations within BRICS. The SCO would also do well to adopt similar tools, thus filling its economic agenda.

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