

# Not Against, but Beyond the West

Ukraine Crisis Draws a Line under Colonial Times

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By the fall of 2023, the military campaign in Ukraine had become an integral part of the international political and economic landscape. Currently, no end of hostilities is expected: neither a decisive victory of either side, nor a peace agreement based on a compromise seems likely in the foreseeable future. The conflict remains the main factor affecting the global balance of power.

It was clear from the very beginning that relations between

Russia and the West were sliding into the most acute version of the Cold War. But the fierceness and persistence of the clash exceeded all expectations. In February 2022, few could imagine the current degree of NATO's involvement in Ukraine or such a complete demolition of all ties between Russia and Western countries. All estimates made at the initial stage proved wrong. Moscow incorrectly assessed Ukraine's military, political, and social

disposition, as well as the readiness of the United States and its allies to go so far in supporting it. The West erroneously believed that the Russian economic system would not withstand an external blockade, while the world economy would keep functioning without Russia relatively painlessly. The parties were also wrong in assessing each other's ability to force the other side to change the course and make concessions.

Errors made during the initial phase were the result of stereotypes formed earlier. Nuances aside, the opponents exaggerated each other's vulnerability. They still do, to some extent. The game has evolved into the drawn-out *Mittelspiel* when everyone tries to mobilize his advantages and achieve decisive superiority in order to get out of the stalemate trap. The confrontation between Russia and the West is intensifying but not changing in quality. Some in Russia call for changing the quality, too, by shifting the focus to the nuclear factor, but this is not a prevalent or official opinion yet.

Major changes have occurred in the part of the world that is not involved in the conflict but affected by it. The World Majority concept, firmly established in Russia as a reference to the non-Western part of the globe, is somewhat confusing, because it suggests a consolidated community while the essential feature of this majority is its heterogeneity

as opposed to the universal value-based cohesion imposed by the West. However, this term covers an array of countries that do not want to be drawn into the grapple and continue the tradition of Western politics. The Ukraine crisis is a product of Western political culture, and Russia, which has assumed an extreme anti-Western position, also acts (or is forced to act) in the Western military-political paradigm.

The World Majority becomes increasingly convinced that the influence of those who have long dictated the rules in the international arena is declining. The long-awaited multipolar world has turned out to be more complex than was expected. It is not about several centers of power that somehow communicate with each other but about the emergence of a network of diverse relationships between different players of asymmetrical stature. These ties, horizontal and vertical, are not quite ordered, and the differing stature adds nonlinearity.

The World Majority can draw several conclusions from the Ukraine crisis. **Firstly**, there is a power that challenges the West openly and without reservations, and the West cannot do anything about it no matter how hard it tries. This allows the non-Western world to act more and more independently. **Secondly**, the Global North states are trying to sort out relations with each other,

giving no thought to how this will affect the Global South. *Thirdly*, the policy of distancing in general while being involved on specific issues can bring good dividends; one just needs to use it skillfully. *Fourthly*, countries can and should develop fruitful relations with each other without major powers; the latter insist on their indispensability but, failing to solve the problems of countries and regions, drive them deeper into an impasse instead.

The latest BRICS summit, held in South Africa in the summer of 2023, reaffirmed these trends. Faced with a critical dilemma between “expanding the group or deepening cooperation,” its members chose the former. Having invited the first six countries, the group cannot put off the next step—highly respected powers are no less eligible. BRICS has apparently opted for quantitative growth, which does not automatically imply a qualitative one. This has its own logic.

BRICS (BRIC at first) was a product of the marketing strategy advanced by American investment bankers (to advertise rapidly growing markets), but a few years later it suddenly acquired its own political dimension. All by itself, this marked a change in the global balance of power—the emergence of a group of major influential non-Western countries determined to pursue their own policy on the international

stage. All four, and eventually five, states are united by one criterion, not articulated but quite readable—they have full sovereignty, that is, the desire and ability (due to their combined potential) to pursue independent foreign and domestic policy. In fact, there are few such states in the world as some lack the required military-economic resources and others join binding alliances, thus voluntarily limiting their sovereignty. In this sense, BRICS’ current composition appears to be quite organic not formally, but in terms of its essential characteristics.

The newcomers are diverse in all respects, but they do not necessarily fit into the above scheme. This suggests that the decision-makers opted for diversification rather than consolidation. The group will keep growing, but there are no plans to create an institutional mechanism, at least for the time being. Actually, the more participants, the more difficult it is to launch such a body. In point of fact, even five countries have serious differences, let alone eleven or more.

The advocates of BRICS as a more cohesive group are disappointed. But is cohesion achievable in principle? Commitment to a common worldview and geopolitical interests is required precisely in and around the Atlantic community. Others insist on their right to decide everything on their own. This trend seems to be prevailing

internationally, while the Western approach will continue to steer countries belonging to the relevant cultural sphere only.

Attempts to turn BRICS into an alliance will not succeed. But the forum of countries determined to expand the space of independent political action affects the international situation all by itself. We can hardly talk about its anti-Western orientation: except for Russia and now, perhaps, Iran, none of the current and likely future participants openly wants to oppose the West. However, this reflects the essence of the coming era when most states will have to constantly choose partners to solve their problems, and they may differ for different problems.

By starting its expansion, BRICS abandons the principle of exclusivity, which was considered important for prestige. And since this has already happened, the group is seeking maximum coverage. For example, China, espousing common destiny for humankind and having potential clearly surpassing all others, does not really need BRICS to be institutionalized. India, which carefully protects its multi-alignment policy, that is, cooperation with everyone without restrictions, also prefers to see BRICS as a heterogeneous group. New Delhi is least interested in the growth of antagonistic sentiments *vis-à-vis* the West within the group.

Russia stands apart as it is the only country among the current members that is locked in a severe confrontation with the West. And since BRICS cannot be transformed into an anti-Western alliance, Moscow can welcome the group's gradual but maximum possible expansion to turn it into the most representative community whose members interact with each other bypassing Western pressure or defying it. This would be enough for the forthcoming period.

These are the factors that are shaping a new international framework. It has not come into being yet. But when the current conflict ends, whatever the outcome for its direct participants, it is the countries of the World Majority whose positions will strengthen the most—not only China, which is often mentioned as the winner of the confrontation between Russia and the West, but a group of countries that previously played a subordinate role but are now gaining freedom of action. I dare suggest that world politics may become more rational, because pragmatic interests will be declared frankly and in a business-like manner, no longer disguised by all sorts of messianism, which the Global North has been practicing so deftly for centuries. And from this point of view, one can say that the Ukraine crisis really draws a line under colonial times in a broad sense.