

The World Majority: Growing Significance but Inadequate Agency

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The academic and political communities have gradually come to perceive the growing significance of non-Western countries. These may variously be termed ‘developing,’ ‘the Global South,’ or the ‘Rest’ (as opposed to the West), but more appropriate seems to be the term ‘World Majority,’ which was introduced into Russian discourse in the first year of Russia’s Special Military Operation (SMO) by renowned political scientist Sergei Karaganov (2022).

The bloc under U.S. hegemony numbers 50 to 55 countries. Russia does not seek hegemony and has no similar bloc to rely on; very few

countries openly and fully support its policies. For example, only four to five states have voted in solidarity with Russia in the UN General Assembly during the SMO's first three years. Instead, about two-thirds of the world's states have preferred neutrality. It has become commonplace to note the World Majority's diversity of members, motives, and actions. Yet this disparate mix of countries has a certain weight in world affairs, especially if taken as a whole. Major powers have recognized the need to take the World Majority into account and to learn to work with it, but they have taken significantly different approaches.

The U.S. pursues the World Majority's support through aggressive pressure campaigns, to which the Majority sometimes submits. For example, in March 2022, the U.S. succeeded in pushing two anti-Russia resolutions through the UN General Assembly. Yet this is a short-term approach, with which the Majority is becoming increasingly annoyed, and its declining effectiveness became quite noticeable in 2023.

The U.S.'s approach to the World Majority is ideologically based on the message that U.S. hegemony is beneficial to most states, but can be maintained only by a guarantor with special rights and privileges. The World Majority has mixed perceptions of this message, as it generally believes that the U.S. abuses its 'privileges,' but is receptive to the argument that destruction of the 'rules-based order' will entail negative consequences for all (Zabolotsky, 2024). This explains the World Majority countries' frequent criticism of U.S. policies, along with their reluctance to support anti-U.S. actions in practice. The U.S. cannot win the World Majority over, but cannot completely lose it, either. Robert Keohane termed this—the belief that, without order and its guarantor, things would be much worse—the “liberalism of fear,” which has become dominant among Western politicians. U.S. appeals to the World Majority do not promise a bright future so much as they warn of the consequences were the existing order to be destroyed.

Russia does not pressure the World Majority. While the Americans need its support, Russia considers its neutrality to be itself beneficial. Naturally, this approach is positively received by the Majority. The

Majority also largely shares Russia's views regarding the U.S.'s abuse of its position and about the injustice and illegitimacy of the 'rules-based order.' Russia expects that the World Majority's ostensibly growing self-awareness and sovereignty will be confirmed by action, but also believes that pressure is of no use, as the World Majority is moving in the right direction and will gradually make its voice heard.

Despite the major difference in U.S. and Russian approaches (which is of great significance to the current diplomatic battle), they also have something in common: both sides expect agency from the World Majority countries. The Americans want an immediate demonstration of support, while Russia expects greater activity in the future, even if the Majority is not yet ready to fully express its position (including due to strong Western pressure/blackmail).

The present relative passivity of the World Majority has various causes. Smaller countries must be cautious, as excessive revisionism can easily lead to losses. Additionally, much of the Majority probably dislikes the choice being demanded of them by Russia (seeking an order that is fair and legitimate) and the U.S. (warning of the consequences of the present order's collapse). Some may be unable to make such a choice between fairness and order.

The World Majority is better viewed as part of the international environment rather than a fully-fledged agent. The Majority can form and express opinions on others' actions, with consequences in the international information environment, and it can collectively reject overly assertive actions, but it does not actually support the actions of anyone. At this point, it is more like a global 'muffler.'

It also lacks institutions for communication and cooperation between its members, it lacks leaders, and it forms opinions rather quickly and spontaneously. It is more like a natural phenomenon that must be taken into account (as it determines the conditions for success) than like an agent with which one can consciously interact.

The efforts of the U.S. and Russia to awake agency in the World Majority, albeit in different ways, may not yield the expected results.

Attempts to push it into alignment with one's position (whether made aggressively or delicately) may prove futile. It may be better to adjust one's own diplomatic position such that the World Majority's opinion become a tailwind rather than a headwind.

Importantly, the World Majority's limited agency may be a permanent characteristic. The future will likely see the emergence of middle powers that are ready for more decisive and independent policies, but such actors will likely distance themselves from the World Majority.

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