

RUSSIA III THE NEW MULTIPOLAR WORLD; NEW AIMS AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

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Introduction

Multipolarity in the field of international relations occurs when there are three or more centres of power, each with power to a comparable degree. Numerous scholars, notably J. David Singer and John F. Copper argue that it is the most stable power structure.² The world is emerging into a new and exciting phase of multipolar development, not least thanks to the emergence and consolidation of BRICS³. There are many positive and some negative sides to this though – and we are fortunate in Russia to be able to take advantage of the former, and protect ourselves robustly against the latter. Fortune “favours the bold”⁴ – and we have no better example of how boldly we position ourselves on the international stage than the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

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² That is compared to unipolarity and bipolarity – see Deutsch Karl W. and Singer, J. David (1964). "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability". *World Politics*. 16 (3): 390–406. doi:10.2307/2009578. See also Copper, J. F. (1975). *The Advantages of a Multipolar International System: An analysis of Theory and Practice*. *International Studies*, 14(3), 397–415.

³ The original BRICS intergovernmental organisation of Brazil, Russia, India, China – later joined by South Africa - saw additional members acceding in January 2024 namely Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Argentina, which was due to join at this time, withdrew following the November 2023 presidential election which returned a candidate opposed to BRICS. Another 14 countries have applied for membership, and may for all practical purposes be considered to be aligned, if not actually Candidate Members. These are Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Palestine, Senegal, Thailand, Venezuela and Vietnam. BRICS currently represents more than 45% of the world’s population, and accounts for over 35% of the world’s GDP (as opposed to the G7 nations account for only 30%). Bilateral agreements between members exist with fundamental principles of non-interference, equality and mutual benefit.

⁴ First coined by Turnus in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (ref. book 10 line 284), “Audentis Fortuna Iuvat”

2023⁵, (FPC 2023) signed into authority by the President on March 31st 2023. This short paper explores something of these positives and negatives.

Multipolarity

Multipolarity has an increased number of independent actors. If we define stability as the probability that the international system retains all of its essential characteristics such that no single nation (specifically its system of imposing its culture, beliefs, politics and economic pressures) becomes dominant, then most of the members of the international system continue to survive and thrive, and large-scale war does not occur. Plenty to unpack in there, beyond the scope of the limitations of length of the papers to this Reading, but delegates here will be able to grasp the boundaries and topics within this wide-ranging statement.⁶

For a while, post 1945, we saw a largely bipolar world order, with America facing off against the Soviet Union predominantly in the European theatre half a world away from itself. Yet the American capitalist and colonial influences, like a virus, could not be contained, leading to flashpoints and confrontations (both ideological and physical) in other places as well. The demise of the Soviet Union led to a temporary power vacuum, one occupied with indecent haste and joy by America, which was not shy in coming forward to expand its values globally. This joy was largely the result of arms sales and other capitalist ventures that improved the profit margins of American companies at the expense of the host nations, not all of which were glad of the American interventions. The emergence – and resurgence – of the Russian Federation began the process of putting an end to this – linked with partners from the CIS. Our Constitution – that we are a multi-national people – embraces our attitude to the world generally, in that we are a rich mixture from which strength can be drawn with tolerance, bound as we are

⁵ Signed into authority by the President on March 31st 2023, available at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (last accessed 7 Feb 2024). This document marks a significant move away from previous doctrines both in format and content

⁶ These papers will allow the interested reader to unpack this statement, especially in the context of arms control and power balance

to our common destiny. Americans will stand behind the motto “e pluribus unum” – “out of many one”. By contrast we could offer an alternative – “e pluribus viribus” – out of many, strength. Humankind in its wider context is similarly bound to a common destiny – we sink or swim together, especially in rising climate change waters brought upon us in large part by American and other allied fossil fuel carelessness.

BRICS as innovation in the World Order

The vision of BRICS⁷ is surely the definitive primary step forward for those of us with a multipolar vision. The original partners have very different cultures and languages, and many other differences too. Yet commonality was found, and significant bilateral treaties were created between partners. The expansion in January 2024 continued this, and other candidates stand ready to join. To me, this is exciting beyond belief – friendship and support, shared values and work to further the prosperity of the BRICS citizens are I think some of the foundations upon which BRICS flourishes. And how it flourishes! Already matching the GDP of the G7, but with a much broader political, doctrinal, and cultural base, BRICS is the world’s template for a multipolar world. In my small corner of Russia, I have students from all the original BRICS countries, and some from the newer ones too. The atmosphere of collegiate and fraternal bonding therein bodes well for the future as these students will be the influencers and decision makers of the next generation.

Positive aspects of multipolarity and BRICS

Our FPC 2023 is a document that delegates will be familiar with. It establishes – by reference to statements on today’s world, its major trends and prospects for development, and the national interests of the Russian Federation. It then establishes our foreign policy priorities, notably (and for the first time)

⁷ No publicly available detailed information seems to exist on the seeds that gave birth to the vision, who said what to whom and when. The original architects of BRICS have surely contributed to world stability and peace in a way that fully deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. With the accession of Sweden to NATO, perhaps the time is now ripe for the creation of a parallel suite of international prizes - open to any nationality – under the auspices of a comparable academical type body formed from the BRICS partners.

against regional tracks of Russian foreign policy. In seventy-six detailed articles, our view of the world, our place in it, and how we seek to positively influence it is laid out. If a single adjective had to be thought of to describe it, I would choose “collaborative”.

There is a wealth of material in the FPC 2023 to choose from, but for this paper I choose two. The first is the establishment of an equitable and sustainable world order (articles 18 and 19) and the second is the requirement for the Rule of Law in international relations (articles 20 to 23)

As to the first, the text is so powerful that it cannot be paraphrased but must be reproduced:

18. Russia is striving towards a system of international relations that would guarantee reliable security, preservation of its cultural and civilisational identity, and equal opportunities for the development for all states, regardless of their geographical location, size of territory, demographic, resource and military capacity, or political, economic and social structure. In order to meet these criteria, the system of international relations should be multipolar and based on the following principles:

- 1) sovereign equality of states, respect for their right to choose models of development, and social, political and economic order;*
- 2) rejection of hegemony in international affairs;*
- 3) cooperation based on a balance of interests and mutual benefit;*
- 4) non-interference in internal affairs;*
- 5) rule of international law in regulating international relations, with all states abandoning the policy of double standards;*
- 6) indivisibility of security in global and regional aspects;*
- 7) diversity of cultures, civilizations and models of social organization, non-imposition on other countries by all states of their models of development, ideology and values, and reliance on a spiritual and moral guideline that is common for all world traditional religions and secular ethical systems;*

8) *responsible leadership on the part of leading nations aimed at ensuring stable and favourable conditions of development, both for themselves and for all other countries and peoples;*

9) *the primary role of sovereign states in decision-making regarding the maintenance of international peace and security*

What wonderful opportunities open up in our BRICS community with the rejection of hegemony, recognitions of sovereign equality, cooperation founded on a balance of mutual interests and benefits, and recognition of diversity of cultures, civilisations and models of social organisation! One example – a recent lunch with Iranian colleagues at a MGIMO conference uncovered many personal similarities between us as well as a delightful exploration of Persian poetry – in some cases as old as 1000 years. I am told that most non-Iranians do not know this, yet it forms a hugely significant part of Iranian everyday culture – even to the point of classical poetry being read to small children at bedtime and taxi drivers quoting it in traffic jams. Knowledge of even one or two snippets of such poetry would lubricate cross cultural discussions on other topics. Inquisitiveness, and a passion for learning about others are I think significant factors in successful international relations.

The second topic I choose is the Rule of Law in the international legal order. We broadly understand this at a visceral level - knowing what a society might look like where the Rule of Law is absent. But to define what the Rule of Law actually is, is much harder. To do this, I give my students Lord Bingham's excellent and highly readable book "*The Rule of Law*"⁸ in which he espouses eight guiding Principles. In particular, I encourage them to regard these Principles as lenses through which we should examine and assess any given legal situation, regulation, treaty, convention, or set of circumstances with a legal dimension.

⁸ Bingham, T. H. *The Rule of Law.*; Penguin Books: London, England, 2011. Refer to Chapter 10 for Bingham's exposition on this topic in the context of international treaties and relations.

One example: I would like to draw attention to the following extract from article 23 of the FPC 2023:

23. In the interests of increasing sustainability of the international legal system, preventing its fragmentation or decay, and avoiding indiscriminate use of generally recognized norms of international law, the Russian Federation intends to make it a priority to:

1) counter the attempts to replace, revise or interpret in an arbitrary way the principles of international law enshrined in the UN Charter and Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, as of 24 October 1970;

2) progressively develop, including given the realities of a multipolar world, and codify international law, primarily within the efforts taken under the aegis of the United Nations, as well as ensure participation of the maximum possible number of states in the UN international treaties, and universal interpretation and application thereof;

3) consolidate the efforts taken by states that advocate restoration of universal respect for international law and enhancement of its role as the basis of international relations;

4) exclude from international relations the practice of taking illegal unilateral coercive measures in violation of the UN Charter;

Taken against Bingham's eight principles, (a whole lecture course in itself, and well beyond this short paper), the overriding message that I take from this is the complete rejection of American capricious self-serving foreign interventions (often without legality) with complete disregard and desecration of different cultures and peoples. I find the position of the Russian Federation to be completely the opposite – where notwithstanding our robust defence of our values and interests – our Foreign Minister and UN Ambassador show the world our compassion, resilience, and adherence to the Rule of Law. We call out those who

fall short of this, and do so with an authoritative voice. Our BRICS partners are broadly aligned with us, the emphasis on “broadly” being a symbol of our strength together as equals with whom there can be differences. That is we have partners with whom we have some differences but there is constructive dialogue - not subservient states joined to us by a doctrinal dog leash with no spine of their own.

Negative aspects of multipolarity and BRICS

No review – however brief – could be complete without considering the other side of the coin. We are fortunate in having a President who is so erudite in historical matters, and quite rightly loses no opportunity to remind our so called Western “partners” of the need to recall history to understand the current situation. He does so with great depth and breadth.⁹ He also mentions plain truths that over-adventurous western leaders should recall before embarking on deploying troops where they would be a threat to the security of the Russian Federation.¹⁰ So, taking a leaf from the President’s book, let us look into history.

In 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War broke out between Athens and Sparta. The Athenian general, Thucydides in his account “*The History of the Peloponnesian War*” gives much food for thought. Despite being Athenian and a combatant, historians generally regard his account as being unbiased and historically accurate. The *History* explains that the primary cause of the Peloponnesian War was the “*growth in power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta*”.¹¹ The term “The Thucydides Trap”¹² describes the theory that when a great power's position as hegemon is threatened by an emerging power, there is a significant likelihood of war between the two powers.

⁹ See for example, the interview to Fox News Tucker Carlson, 9 February 2024 – see transcript: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411>

¹⁰ See the Address to the Federal Assembly, 29 February 2024 – see transcript <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/73585>

¹¹ Thucydides 5th century BC – *The History of the Peloponnesian War* – see (1.23.6)..Book 1 traces the growth of the Athenian Empire (1.89-118). Athenians defend their empire on the basis it was given to them, not taken by force (see for example the speech at 1.73-79, where amongst other ideas they opine that they did nothing contrary to human nature in accepting it, nor in refusing to give it up. See <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm#link2HCH0001> .Thucydides may meet via his plaster cast bust in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, made from a Roman copy (located at Holkham Hall) itself taken from an early fourth-century BC Greek original.

¹² The term was first coined by Professor Graham Allison in a 2012 article in the Financial Times.

*“Thucydides's Trap refers to the natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power...[and] when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception.”*¹³

It is not difficult to see the parallels to the modern day. We have in the BRICS community a powerful entity coming into mature existence. This threatens the status quo of the American centric view of the world that its allies have accreted themselves around much like chewing gum stuck on a lampost. Our community's rise is a gentle, mutually cooperative and respectful one. Yes, there are differences, but they are dealt with as they should be between broadly equal partners who have the same multipolar goals in mind. Not as subservient satellites to a hegemon.

This then is the possible negative that BRICS might bring – war. Not just any war, but as the President drew attention to, there is a risk of nuclear war if cool heads do not prevail. And therein lies the strength of BRICS – our strength out of many world class statesmen, working together. Diplomacy and skilful international relations being the tools with which we can robustly protect ourselves.

In this context, mention should be made of Maria Vladimirovna Zakharova, the official spokesperson of our Foreign Ministry¹⁴. Her weekly press briefings, usually delivered without notes, and often lasting three hours or more, are clear articulations of the very best of the reality of our FPC and BRICS. I always commend her to my students to be studied as the best example of our foreign policy outreach – supremely articulate, occasionally objectionable, but always authoritative. Exactly how it should be, and the wider world should listen to her

¹³ Allison, Graham (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. ISBN 978-1328915382, xv–xvi

¹⁴ Ms. Zakharova is an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation. The dictionary defines a Plenipotentiary is a person, especially a diplomat, usually invested with the full power of independent action on behalf of their government, often in a foreign country. Foreigners should bear this in mind when listening to her briefings, for they are not (as many seem to think) equivalent to the press secretarial briefings given for example by the US Administration.

messages from our Foreign Ministry and take heed of the strength of our passionately held views that are often in stark contrast to the Anglo-Saxon western capitalist viewpoints.

The diversity of our BRICS union, the multi nationality and multi ethnicity of its leadership, the size of the population it represents and its GDP (which is increasing in economies that are not as debt burdened as that of America) - are all factors that will bring coolness to rising tensions in discussions with the American hegemon.

However, the hegemon's unpredictability when threatened – and their capabilities – need to be able to be robustly contained – and it would not surprise me to learn that our leaders are already well advanced in arrangements to create a Pact of mutual support and defence – one based on shared values not least of which is the wish for multipolarity and the strength – in all its forms - of one through many.

Conclusion

Our FPC and our BRICS brotherhood are principles, and a reality, that we can (and should) all get behind with enthusiasm and vigour – as we move to our next phase of the world order. They represent the best of, and the future of humanity.