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BRICS+ – COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES AND DEVELOPMENT RISKS

BRICS (from 2024 – BRICS+) entered the third decade of the 21st century as an important constant of international relations and the system of global governance. There are 18 years of development behind us, as a result of which the membership of this prestigious club has grown from four to ten. Among the new participants there is Saudi Arabia, which authorities, having made a decision in principle to join, prefer the option of gradual involvement of the kingdom in the activities of various BRICS+ structures. A few dozen more states are seeking to become either full members (including Algeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Venezuela) or to gain an observer status.

For Russia, the successes of BRICS+ are particularly important, as our country was at the origin of its creation and in many ways was its main creator. Conceptually, the roots of the association go back to the second half of the 1990s, when Moscow promoted the idea of the Russia-India-China (RIC) strategic triangle. In retrospect, it can be argued that the RIC subsequently grew into BRICS+, just as it can be argued that the association created in 2006 absorbed the RIC. A false start in its expansion occurred only once, when in December 2023, J. Milei, Argentina's new president, withdrew his country's application to join.

BRICS+ has a pronounced inter-civilizational dimension, and the latter in turn is an inherent characteristic of a polycentric world. The geographical diversity also draws attention, which emphasizes that in today's world the distance separating partners and like-minded people is not as fundamental as it has been throughout most of human history. The civilizational characteristic is closely related to the category of sovereignty, which largely determines the worldview of the states that created BRICS and joined it later.

In a sense, BRICS+ is a super-integration association, but not an extra-integration one. It is not a classic interstate or international organization, especially an integration union. It includes countries that participate in various structures that do not necessarily overlap with each other (EAEU, SCO, Gulf Cooperation Council, African Union, Mercosur, etc.). At the same time, of course, BRICS+ has obvious integration elements stemming from the very motivation to participate in it – to coordinate and harmonize

their actions in bilateral and multilateral formats. As the association develops, its club character begins to combine with the creation of structures that have institutional features, such as summits, various permanent forums, or are full-fledged international organizations, such as the New Development Bank.

The association grows not only in numbers, but over time begins to fulfill functions that were not previously associated with it. Especially after its latest expansion, BRICS+ is, first, beginning to resemble an informal mouthpiece of the global South, and second, to play the role of an effective link between Russia and the non-Western world. The inclusive nature of this international club is striking, which stems from the fact that members of the association may include states with a complicated history of relations, such as China and India. Only the countries of the collective West do not fit into the idea of this inclusiveness, but not because of the nature of BRICS+, but because of their own stance towards it. Undoubtedly, from a geopolitical point of view, the West treats BRICS+ as a competitor, and jealously follows the development of the one it perceives as an alternative model of international cooperation. At the same time, the association itself cannot be called anti-Western, given the close economic and political interaction of most of its members with Western countries and organizations.

It is fair to say that the development of BRICS+ is a reflection of the shift of the center of gravity of the world economy to Eurasia. But it seems that to reduce everything to this factor would be wrong and would diminish the role of the association in world politics. It is broader than reflecting new routes for economic and financial flows. No less important is the significance of BRICS+ as a kind of research laboratory for improving or even restructuring effective mechanisms of global governance and regulation. In this sense, it is reasonable to speak about the aspiration of the association to the future, while many actions of the collective West are perceived in the world as a desire to cling on to the past.

The club, informal character is also characteristic of a number of Western structures, primarily the G7. However, it represents what so sharply distinguishes it from BRICS+ – opposition to others, consolidation on the basis of exclusivity and an Anglo-Saxon core, willingness to impose or coordinate sanctions regimes against those the West identifies as adversaries and competitors, rejection of the notion of the world as a diversity of cultures and civilizations in favor of a primitive approach of “friend-or-foe” and “democracies versus autocracies”. Of course, the G7 also has its own “outreach” format – inviting representatives of non-Western states to meetings. But, in fact, it is a function of the same basic attitudes of the collective West to protect the “rule-based world” convenient for it in the first place and resembles a tug-of-war to reduce the number of those who are friends with the “wrong” states.

The notion of humanistic values, including certain moral and ethical principles originating in Christianity, was an outgrowth of European civilization. However, history has so ordered that many of those values and worldview ap-

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proaches have come to be perceived in the European West as “traditional” values with connotations of being retrograde, not modern, not progressive. In today’s world, in many respects, a situation is emerging where, to a greater extent, the BRICS+ and other most prosperous countries of the global South are taking up the defense of humanistic values, while the collective West is promoting radical and pseudo-liberal attitudes, and not only social, but also socio-economic ones.

The latter stems from the European West’s enthusiasm, which has grown into an obsession, for green technology and an unquestioning belief in the infallibility of the anthropogenic version of climate change. It would seem that energy transition and the “green course” is a progressive thing. But the flip side of this obsession is an obsession with technology. Only if earlier the improvement of life meant the use of technology for the sake of creating a society of consumption and abundance, now other, even more sophisticated and expensive technologies are aimed at actually depriving people of their former prosperity and comfort, both in the industrial and post-industrial sense.

In terms of foreign policy approaches, when comparing the collective West and BRICS+, they seem to switch places, if we think in terms of traditions and innovations. It is obvious that it is the collective West’s foreign policy that is retrograde, conformist, when the stake is placed on coercion, force (whether through “soft power” or hard power), sanctions regimes, megaphone diplomacy, information confrontation, and preserving a status quo. This contrasts with what BRICS+ and many other states of the global South are promoting: real multilateralism, sovereign equality, consideration of each other’s interests, moving away from bloc mentality, rejection of the philosophy of westernization pretending to be modernization demanded by all, etc.

Advantages and disadvantages are characteristic of both classical international organizations with international legal personality, such as the UN, the African Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, etc., and club formats (BRICS+, G7, G20, N5, etc.). The former have their own charters, extensive governing bodies, legally prescribed rights and obligations, and, in fact, they are pyramidal structures. The latter have greater flexibility, the possibility of a situational combination of bilateral and multilateral tracks, the consensual nature of decisions, the primacy of voluntariness and trust. There are also many organizations of an intermediate nature, such as the OSCE, which has not yet acquired its own charter.

First, regional integration associations, which are formed around common free trade zones, customs unions and common markets, stand apart. Of these, the most clearly organized is the European Union, which, until the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009, did not even have a procedure for a member country to withdraw from it. Second, military-political blocs with their natural formalized governance structures, discipline and legally enshrined rights and obligations.

The United Nations has unique features and characteristics as a unique universal and generally recognized interstate (intergovernmental) international organization. There are some entities of a continental scale, such as the African Union, the Community of American States, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and others. Most interstate associations and integration projects are region-

al in nature. BRICS+ certainly stands out against this background, as it includes representatives of several continents in the Eastern and Western hemispheres of the Earth.

Centrifugal and centripetal processes exist in the organizations of all listed categories, and the problem of integrity and consolidation of this or that structure is solved in each of them differently. For the European Union, Brexit – Britain’s withdrawal from the regional integration union – was an extremely painful process. For BRICS+, Argentina’s withdrawal of its application to join was not a notable problem. Of course, internal structuring is important for club formats as well. No matter how many countries join BRICS+ in the future, in addition to the participating “ten”, the participation of Russia, India and China will always be systemically important for BRICS+. The withdrawal of any of them from the association would be its version of Brexit. There are no countries or their domestic groupings in BRICS+ that view the other part of the participants as systemic adversaries and targets for restriction and against whom they are willing to wage proxy wars in regional armed conflicts. In the other club format, the G20, the situation is different, as the G7 countries that make up the G20 adhere to bloc discipline and engage in open sabotage of the activities of some member countries.

BRICS+ is not a harmonious entirety, has its own internal lines of tension, but offers such impressive consolidating incentives that contradictions recede into the background. At the same time, the association faces significant challenges, especially in the early years after the massive expansion that has taken place. Given the fact that the number of countries knocking on the door of BRICS+ is much higher than the current number of its members, it is important to maintain the stability of the “club” and its ability to act effectively within the framework of the decisions taken. At the same time, it is important to find formats for engaging a wide range of international actors in BRICS+ activities that suit everyone. In light of this, the observer state status will remain highly sought after, as possibly the associate membership status will.

The association will certainly be characterized by the methods of “multi-speed movement” and “variable geometry”, with the help of which interested states can more quickly implement certain projects without the need to obtain their support from all participants of the “club”. These methods are well-tested, including in the history of the EU, so that they can be applied to BRICS+ well-calibrated, taking into account the lessons learned from other structures. When an international organization lives with a voluntary strait jacket of rigid membership requirements and developed supranational bodies, as in the EU, “multi-speed movement” is fraught with internal stratification, creation of competing groupings, emergence of center and periphery, first and second class states. Such risks are not seen in BRICS+ at this stage of development.

Of course, an increase in the size of any interstate association cannot but bring certain procedural and substantive difficulties. But it seems that in the case of BRICS+, the enlargement process entails many more positive points, including more stable internal balances to compensate for the asymmetric weight of Russia, India and China in the association. Behind the quantitative expansion of BRICS+ there are clearly qualitative parameters. Each of the participating countries contributes its added value to the “club”.

For example, Beijing offers the Belt and Road strategy; New Delhi offers the India-Middle East-Europe and North-South corridors; Moscow offers raw materials, cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union, continental transportation corridors, its competencies in peaceful nuclear power and energy, and, in the future, the Northern Sea Route transportation artery; Brazil offers its leading position in Latin America; Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia offer their leading positions in the world hydrocarbon markets, and the last two countries also offer their large-scale investment opportunities.

It will be important for BRICS+ to continue to position itself as an association that does not seek confrontation with others and does not see itself as an alternative mechanism

for global governance and regulation. BRICS+ already includes many countries from Eurasia and other continents that do not seek to oppose the collective West and break relations with it. They still do not regard economic and financial interaction with it as dependency. Many of them are indeed interested, for example, in diversifying foreign exchange reserves, but are not aimed at de-dollarisation of the world trade. On the contrary, basing BRICS+ not on the “zero-sum game” philosophy, but on providing member states and potential members of the “club” with additional competitive advantages in trade and cooperation with any external players of their choice, is an important trump card in preserving the attractiveness of the association for many years to come.