

A Global South 2.0? Evaluating the Concept of World Majority in Russian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The idea of world majority, floated by Russian experts after 2022, seeks to simultaneously offer a foreign policy direction for the country while also building a meta-category to define the non-western world. As an emerging concept, this article seeks to be one of the first systematic approaches towards understanding what the world majority stands for and how it reflects Russian foreign policy thinking, through engagement with the political and expert discourse. It argues that while the concept would be a useful tool for Russian foreign policy, it offers a weak proposition for a broader application beyond its borders. The article also argues that the characteristics of the world majority are a near perfect replication of the already established ideas of the global south, thus failing to offer a new interpretation of the international system to the non-western world. Having established their similarities, the article uses the challenges faced by the global south to predict the faultlines that can be expected to hinder the real world implementation of the world majority. It also highlights just how difficult delivering a common agenda through such meta-categories is, bringing into question the true value of these concepts.

Keywords

global south, world majority, Russian foreign policy, BRICS, SCO, liberal world order

Introduction

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the Russian Federation sought to reclaim its status and position in the world, the choice in the initial years was made in favour of ‘joining the western community of nations’ (Tsygankov, 2023). However, as relations with the West soured, Moscow sought to distance itself from Western ideas both in the domestic and international domain – opposing both liberal values as well as the rules-based order. But in this process, especially in foreign policy making, the main reference point for Russia remained the West. While it steadily improved relations with the non-western world and talked about a Greater Eurasian Partnership, the much publicised pivot to the East continued to be weak, with the exception of China.

However, in 2022, when the Russia-West ties hit a new post-Cold War low and severe sanctions were imposed, the sense of a break with the West reached its highest in several decades. This latest rupture came at a distinct period of time

wherein the pre-eminence and leading role of the West in the international system had been witnessing a relative decline alongside the emergence of non-western powers challenging the contours of the post-world war 2 international system.

Within this milieu, as Tsygankov (2023) notes, two key Russian identity interpretations have emerged that are relevant to international relations. One relates to exceptionalism that presents Russia as a ‘conservative autarchic civilization principally opposed to political, economic, and cultural developments within Western societies’ and the other relating to Russia as ‘capitalising on its geographical

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position' to promote 'cross-cultural dialogue and global understanding'. As it relates to foreign policy, elements of both these ideas but with a tilt towards the latter can be seen in the emergence of the concept of world/global majority that first made its appearance in 2023. In an undefined world order, this approach puts the non-western world as the focal point of Russian foreign policy efforts, acknowledging both Moscow's troubles with the west as well as the shifting of power to the east.

As a new concept, this paper seeks to understand what the world majority stands for and build a deeper understanding of how Russian discussions view the country's future standing. Since the concept is still emerging, with various different discussions seeking to shape its contours, only limited systematic work is currently available on the subject. This article is an attempt to begin to bridge that gap in academic literature while simultaneously developing a critique of the concept as an overarching meta-category for the external world.

Through engaging with Russian official and expert discourse, the article will argue that world majority can be an advantageous concept for organising in the Russian discourse a foreign policy approach towards a diverse variety of external players in the non-western world. This pragmatic understanding of the world can be a useful guide for Russian policymakers seeking to reconcile means and ends in a 'world between orders' (Menon, 2022). However, it is less likely to provide either the defining framework for the rest of the world to identify with or for a more widespread adoption of the terminology, because of its inherent borrowing of ideas that have long been established by what is today known as the global south, which will be established through a comparative study with the latter. This makes the article one of the first systematic critiques of the concept of world majority that is currently itself in the process of being shaped, including by the ongoing events.

Through this analysis, the article seeks to problematise meta-categories like the global south and world majority itself. It will argue that the ability of overarching concepts to turn into effective policy making at the international stage has remained limited. By investigating the challenges that global south has faced, the article will put a question mark both on the existing and new concept, raising fundamental questions about these analytical categories.

The Concept of World Majority: An Overview

The coining of the term has been attributed to Russian foreign policy expert Fyodor Lukyanov (Karaganov, 2022), and has since been elaborated upon by several other experts who have assigned various meanings to it since late 2022. While scholars are still debating whether to call it world majority or global majority,¹ the Kremlin uses both terms

interchangeably, with the latter being more common. Before the term gained popularity, the official Russian transcripts were already referring to the rest of the world as representing the 'majority' (Putin, 2022), especially in its interactions directed at external actors (Putin, 2023a). Since late 2023, the term world/global majority has made it into Kremlin's language, including those related to BRICS (Putin, 2023b), EEF (Putin, 2023c), meetings with representatives from the non-western world (Putin, 2025a) and high-level meetings with Russian politicians and businesses (Putin, 2024a). The Russian president (Putin, 2025b) has also used the forum of Valdai Discussion Club to elaborate on the concept in front of an audience of international experts, mostly from the non-western world. The synergy between academic and official pronouncements has been visible here, with both the levels interacting with each other to build the concept.

In simple terms, the idea of world majority emerged for Russian experts after the beginning of war with Ukraine in 2022, which led to a breakdown of relations with the West. This prompted the necessity of decisively turning to the non-western world to deal with the political and economic pressure of the western sanctions. When a large part of the world did not join western sanctions, despite majority UN General Assembly resolutions calling on Russia to withdraw its forces to 1991 boundaries, it was seen as the proof of critical shifts underway in the international system that contributed in the opinion of some 'to the dismantling of the political and historical structure of the existing world order' (Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, 2022). This framing is important because it makes Russia a catalyst for making visible this world majority after 2022 and reinforces the construction of its identity as a key player who can collaborate with the non-western world to build a new world order (Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, 2022). In this iteration, the key agent becomes not the non-western world that wishes to stay neutral but rather Russia as the state that is 'fighting' to 'create a fairer world order' (Putin, 2023d) and for 'the freedom of the whole world' (Putin, 2023e).

There is nuance here in the academic discussions, wherein the debates acknowledge that this group that it calls 'world majority' did not emerge exclusively as a result of its actions in Ukraine but is rather a product of the rise of the rest (Bordachev, 2024), as well as a decline of U.S. hegemony. However, Russian military actions in Ukraine are considered critical for the world majority to be revealed in its entirety as the challenge to the existing western-dominated world order that resulted from several non-western states refusing to join sanctions against Russia would not have happened without Moscow's actions. This, the argument goes, demonstrates Russian ability to play a critical role in the current world order, including through use of military force and its ability to defend itself, which is sought to compensate for the lack of its economic prowess that has played a decisive role in the ongoing shifts of the power equations towards the east in the post-Cold War period.

The behaviour of other states that prevented Russia from being isolated was seen as a sign of the presence of a large number of countries ‘not controlled by the West’ (MID, 2023a). This in turn has engendered the idea of a ‘minority’ in world affairs, a position allocated to the U.S. and its allies in these discussions on world majority, due to their inability to exercise hegemonic power in isolating Russia, symbolising a shifting world order and an end of the post-Cold war American hegemony. This aspect is especially valuable for the official Russian narrative that reiterates the inevitability of the emergence of a multipolar world order that will be ‘democratic and fair’ to the majority of the world (Putin, 2023f). This understanding essentially preserves Russian ambitions of being a great power that has a central role in moving the international system away from the western power structures, and building new structures with its active participation (Karaganov, 2022). Following this viewpoint, a victory in Ukraine is important not only for the realisation of Russia’s military aims or for Russian position vis-a-vis Europe but rather is consequential in more important terms of a much broader result of creation of a polycentric world order (MID, 2023a).

The concept has also dovetailed with Russian expectations and hopes from BRICS/BRICS Plus and SCO, which in the longer term perspective are seen as being some of the key actors (MID, 2023a) in helping contribute to the building of a new world order through alternative institutions and rules (Putin, 2024b), outside of the existing western-dominated structures. This is especially relevant after its exclusion from several western institutions after 2022 but the sentiment had been building for some time given Russia’s sense of having been excluded from the western community of nations, including in the case of European security architecture. Here, Russia takes care to highlight the existing dissatisfaction in the non-western world with the existing global governance structures (Putin, 2023g), presenting the non-western organisations (and itself as a key actor in them) as reflecting the aspirations of the global majority (Putin, 2023h).

There is a recognition of diversity and non-allied nature of states of world majority with the absence of clear-cut blocs. However, there is a belief that the interests of the world majority differ from that of the West (MID, 2023a) that opens a space for Russia to build interest-based links with the non-western world. With regard to conceptualisation, the official and expert understanding of the concept has therefore converged in various respects, even if it still remains unclear whether the idea itself will gain widespread acceptance beyond the Russian borders.

The Logic of World Majority

Broadly, the entire argument rests on a simpler, much evident idea of the relative decline of the west that also manifests itself in the ability of western states or the

institutions dominated by them to influence a large number of states simultaneously; signalling a period of change for the existing world order. In other words, a part of the rationale behind the concept can be defined in terms of the change in the broader distribution of capabilities with its resultant strategic implications. The power shift from west to east has been an ongoing process that has accelerated since the 2008 financial crisis. The relative decline of the U.S. as a world hegemon and the rise of the rest has opened up space for emerging powers to make their presence felt at the global decision-making table, including in resisting the pressures from external powers. Amidst a relative decline in the ability of the west to influence the rest, Russia seeks to position itself as not part of the former but the latter. In this understanding of the emerging contours of a new world order, Moscow sees the possibility of building a structure that has a more diffused power hierarchy while simultaneously also finding a place for itself in the non-western world.

In practical terms, this relates to a recognition that Russia needs to turn more decisively than ever before towards the non-west and find sources of its economic development in this part of the world. In this case, Asia, Middle East, Africa and Latin America become important areas of concentration of efforts for its policies. The ability of Russia to pursue a multi-vector policy is seen as a positive in this regard in building pragmatic engagement with a wide variety of partners. Interestingly, while seeking to build such a meta-category, the vision of policy implementation still remains largely regional or bilateral in its iteration.

Apart from the geopolitical dimension, there is the ideational part of the concept that is in the process of being explored. In this direction, there is an effort to stand apart from the West. Hence, a desire to find a new category of world majority rather than use the more established category of the ‘non-West’ so as to avoid the ‘West’ as being the key defining point. The attempt to do so clashes with the fact that the west continues to be the ‘main Other’ of Russia, with the ‘state language’ organised around it (Laruelle, 2024). However, the contradiction is not surprising for a power still searching for a place for itself in the post-Cold War period, both in the west and non-west, with varying degrees of success. After losing its superpower status following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has tried different ways to establish itself as a major power. Krickovic and Pellicciari (2021) identify distinct evolutions in Russian policy in pursuit of status, from the efforts to find a place in the western world in the immediate post-cold war period to a focus on post-Soviet integration to a focus on Eurasia.

Scholars are as yet divided on whether these efforts over the years have led to creation of a definite state ideology. While Suslov (2024b) argues that Putinism has a distinctive ideological identity, Laruelle (2024) has defined ideology as being more than a doctrine and as comprising a worldview. In the latter understanding, there are a set of core worldviews and values around which other ideas useful to the regime are

generated. Regardless of the terminology, there is a sense that since 2022, a coalescence has happened around some key ideas. These include positioning Russia as a unique great power that resists western pressure and is anti-hegemonic, focus on statism and sovereignty (also economic and technological sovereignty), conservatism, defender of traditional values, civilisational identity, anti-fascist power, anti-colonial force, creator of a just world order and Eurasianism (Laruelle, 2024; Mankoff, 2024; Suslov, 2024b).

These ideas possess both a domestic and foreign policy dimension that are interrelated and cannot always be separated from each other. As will be evident in the subsequent paragraphs, the foundational ideas of world majority derive themselves from these Russian internal narratives, which then are modified to reflect in various foreign policy directions.

The turn to world majority presents Russia as the power that is confronting the west and enabling the tilting of the balance in favour of non-western world (Suslov, 2024b), thus shoring up both its domestic identity as an anti-western power that also gives it a rationale to claim a leading position among the world majority. Russia as a civilisation state refers to the embodiment of certain values over a historical period of time that set it apart. While invoking traditional values, the idea implies its internal values that provide direction for external actions, and in Eurasian heritage there is a harking back to a Russia that is unique due to its geography and resultant traditions that have an impact on its international relations. Its self-description as an anti-colonial power that is resisting western hegemony is used to criticise the west. This is done by capitalising on already existing ideas like anti-globalisation, neo-imperialism and environmental degradation to gain salience in the non-western world while also performing the pragmatic function of aligning Russia with a part of the world that is growing rapidly (Suslov, 2024b). As Laruelle (2024) notes, there is both stability in core beliefs in these ‘discursive notions’ or ‘strategic narratives’ while allowing for plenty of opportunism beyond that.

One of the key features of world majority that has been identified is the ongoing dissatisfaction with the existing world order. This dovetails into Russia’s conception of itself as a country of justice that is striving for the creation of a more just world order (Suslov, 2024a). From the grievance about unequal rules and discriminatory practices of the existing world order, other relevant characteristics related to criticism of the west develop. Another aspect of dissatisfaction with the existing order is that the world majority is seen as being willing to contribute to changing the situation, making it a partner in ‘democratising world order and eradicating neo-colonial practices’, which would lead to construction of a system that would be more equitable, in line with priorities outlined in the Russian foreign policy concept (MID, 2023b).

Yet another key feature of world majority is the reluctance of states ‘to subordinate their foreign policy to the collective or individual interests of other world powers’ (Bordachev, 2024). Domestically, for Russia, this is a nod to its statist roots and self-description as a fully sovereign power that makes its decisions without pressure from outside. In the world majority, this is seen as being evident in their avoidance of alliances, refusal to take sides and pursuit of autonomy in decision-making, allowing them to pursue policies that would not isolate Moscow after 2022. Even while not always being pro-Russian in their orientation, the focus is on pursuit of national interests while maximising autonomy in pursuit of ties with major powers (Bordachev, 2024), which has in the case of the ongoing war worked in favour of Moscow. This is visible in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote wherein 141 countries voted in favour of a resolution calling upon Russia to ‘immediately cease its unlawful use of force against Ukraine’, with only five voting against while 35 countries abstained (United Nations, 2022). The annexation of four Ukrainian regions was also condemned with similar numbers in the UNGA. However, even out of the global south states that did vote for these resolutions, none were willing to join western sanctions to put pressure on Russia to change course. In addition, the abstentions included major global south states like China, India and South Africa – who continued to pursue their neutral stance (Rutland, 2022). This desire of the world majority to not be guided by anybody, whether western or non-western, is seen as helpful for Russia currently in portraying Russia as aligned with them in the form of an anti-hegemonic power that resists western (outside) pressure.

Of course, it is acknowledged that one cannot assume the ‘majority’ is something consolidated and united by common principles (Lukyanov, 2023), making its unity not a feature of the concept. It is also understood that the world majority is ‘not the anti-West’ and that as a whole these countries have a collective power in world affairs if ‘taken as a whole’. In general, the developing world has a long history of building interest-based coalitions with a wide variety of actors to deal with regional and global issues, where engagement or opposition to the West is built on the merits of any case. This clarifies for Moscow that the group of countries it is labelling the ‘world majority’ is neither pro-Russian nor anti-western. This Russian interpretation gives rise to another feature of the world majority – its diversity being its essence (Lukyanov, 2023) and a source of strength. Having acknowledged the disparities, Russian experts believe that ‘objectively their interests (of the world majority) are at odds with western interests’ as defined currently (MID, 2023a). Here, Russia has found fertile ground for its criticism of the prevailing world order, capitalising on dissatisfaction that has long existed in the non-western world. Some of the problem areas that have long been criticised in the non-western world include dominance of the

international system by a few powers (mostly western), inadequate representation of the developing world in global governance institutions, forms of neo-imperialism, etc.

Here, a flexible approach means Russia can use its various approaches instrumentally, for instance, invoking traditional values more in bilateral settings attuned to local scenarios while Eurasianism can be invoked with specific regional states or organisations. The Eurasian identity coincides with Russia's idea of itself as a distinct civilisation with traditional values, wherein the turn to the East fits its identity and ideology better (Suslov, 2024b). In this exercise, Russia looks at the outside world to determine its key identifying features and tries to fit the Russian worldview to the external specifics, picking and choosing what works where to maximise its appeal to the non-western world.

This juxtaposition of Russia's own narratives about itself with the themes popular in the global south has distilled itself in the world majority. This was visible in Putin's latest speech at the Valdai Discussion Club (Putin, 2025b), where he noted that the essence of global majority was their orientation towards 'own civilisational interests' focused on development, resistance to external pressure in pursuit of these interests, building multi-faceted ties in a 'polycentric world', new 'decolonisation' based on 'political, economic, cultural and world outlook sovereignty', turning to their roots, etc. leading to an overall transformation of international relations. In all of these features of world majority, there is a nod to Russia's strategic narratives as well – resistance of the west, sovereignty, civilisation state, anti-hegemonic, anti-colonial and statist. In this way, the world majority gels well with the dominant Russian narratives about itself at present.

However, as the subsequent paragraphs argue, while the concept of world majority might provide a pathway to link domestic and external worldviews of Russia and aid engagement with the non-western world, there are inconsistencies and contradictions that continue to plague the concept as the Russian government and experts have attempted to expand its remit.

One of these contradictions follows from the feature of the world majority not being guided by anyone. The pragmatic pursuit of national interest is seen as a positive in Russia, given that it allows space to manoeuvre outside of ideological or alliance commitments. But this also makes a cohesive understanding of world majority almost an impossibility and the results of engagement with any power are both harder to predict and not always beneficial even to Russia. This is because alignments are forged depending on circumstance and prevailing power balance (Bordachev, 2024), complicating any single explanation of how members of the world majority will react in different situations with a different set of actors involved, and ruling out a more cohesive response as a whole. This is already visible in Russian narrative building where it wants to both insist that the world majority has agency and independence but not

when it goes against their interests. Russian experts have displayed a suspicion of the 'elites' of world majority countries that might not always make the choice due to their being embedded in the western system (MID, 2023a) but that the movement away from it can be facilitated. This is also seen in the case of the UNGA votes in 2022 where the resolutions that went against Russia were attributed to U.S. political pressure (MID, 2023a; NPR, 2022). This is not to deny that major powers exercise influence on other states but to argue that any move that goes against Russia being interpreted as the result of western pressure takes away the agency of the world majority in pursuing their national interests as deemed fit – whose independent decision-making ironically is something that the Russians insist is a distinct feature of this part of the world. Even in the case of a much larger and influential power like India, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has argued that it is the West that is trying to drag it into 'anti-China schemes' (Lavrov, 2025); as if New Delhi was incapable of defining its national interests on its own or that the relationship with the U.S. has not been a conscious policy decision over decades of policymaking in the Indian strategic thought.

There are contradictions that directly relate to how Russia sees itself in relation to the 'rest', as distinct from the west. While Russia has been calling for an end to the U.S. hegemony, establishment of a more equitable multipolar world order based on sovereign equality of states (MID, 2023b); there is simultaneously the belief that a new system would not lead to the disappearance of the importance of major powers given that they will form a rigid core based on their military capabilities and mutual relationships (Bordachev, 2024). While this is only natural given the role of distribution of capabilities in determining the international system, it inherently means some powers enjoy more privileges than others given their relative power position – a far cry from the rhetoric of a democratic and just world order. This hierarchy of relations that accrues even in seemingly equitable multilateral institutions, with sovereign equality being different from political equality, is not something that Russia is willing to forego, given its consistent obsession with its identity as a great power, that sets it apart from the 'rest'.

This is also closely related to another contradiction of the concept wherein Russia wants to simultaneously be constitutive of the world majority in terms of distinguishing itself from the west, presenting itself as an 'active member of the world majority by being its most important geopolitical resource and its military-political core' (MID, 2023a), but also remain external to it as part of a group of major powers that stand above the rest in a future world order. Thus, while Russia does want to see the emergence of a system that decimates western influence and prevents domination of any one power, it is also interested in preserving its status as one of the largest nuclear powers and a veto-wielding member of the UNSC.

The idea of world majority for Russia then does not mean delegating more power to the UN General Assembly. The actions that Russia has undertaken in the past in its neighbourhood – the formation of EAEU and CSTO – have reinforced its own dominance. The BRICS/BRICS Plus and SCO – touted as vanguards of a new world order that will be based on rules that are different from those of western-dominated multilateral organisations – remain small clubs where the leading role of the few member states is zealously guarded. Russia is clear that along with it, China and India, forms the key parts of these two institutions (Putin, 2024c). Russia, India and China also stand apart from other members in these organisations on the basis of their relative power positions. This inherently puts the bigger powers in a position of engineering the workings of the multilateral forums to their benefit; including on issues like extension of membership to new states, agenda formation and setting up of rules of conduct; even if the overall system is built on consensual decision-making. It is not surprising that Russia is not willing to give up on the positions of influence it occupies at the regional and multilateral level, but that makes the claims about justice and democratising the world order a contested territory.

Also, the presentation of Russia as the critical catalyst in formation of a new category of world majority reproduces familiar problems hitherto associated with Eurocentric ideas in international relations, where the agency and role of the non-western world either remains unacknowledged or is undermined.

One could see some merit in the Russian argument that the scale of events in 2022 brought into focus the extent to which power had shifted away from the U.S. since the beginning of the post-cold war period. But it smoothes over something a lot more fundamental in this sweeping generalisation – that Russia had not been a catalytic factor in bringing about the changes that allowed the ‘rest’ to refuse to fall in line with western policy of isolating Russia. That has been a factor of the rise of the east and over the past years a relative decline of the U.S.; which in the aggregate has led to a change in the distribution of capabilities destabilising the post-cold war American hegemony but without fully catalysing into something new at the moment.

It is not that Russian scholars do not acknowledge this, readily agreeing that the main reason for the shift in the current international system is the rise of the non-west, which means that the external conditions under which Russia began the war with Ukraine were fundamentally different than at any other time in the post-world war 2 period. However, some still insist that Russia has and continues to ‘play a role in liberating the world from Western dictate’ (Karaganov, 2022). This kind of argument has its attendant problematic aspects that have been explored prominently in global south literature. It presents the danger of falling into the trap of historical conditions mentioned above where the Eurocentric nature of debates in

international relations have written a history with the West as a central actor even in the developing world while undermining local histories of the global south that shaped their world. The global south has sought to turn the conversation through building accounts of revisionist history to question a particular western way of looking at the formation of the international system, a process that continues till date. In this regard, the very Russian argument about not referring to the world majority as non-West is also straight out of post-colonial thought that aims to recover ‘alternative political subject hoods’ and ‘to decentre Europe as the referent subject for historical accounts’ (Sabaratnam, 2011). This has been to counter a continued treatment of the global south as objects in need of external involvement and direction.

In addition, the relevance of the concept of south and then the global south derives from the fact that it was an expression of the agency of the developing world looking to define their position at the world stage. This construction of an identity through a collective effort is completely different from the Russian effort through ‘world majority’ to unilaterally decide for the ‘rest’ how they should define themselves.

These contradictions do not make the concept of world majority unusable, but rather point to a narrower application. As is evident from the above discussion, the concept can be a useful way for Russia to provide the grounding to organise its relations with the non-western world, especially with the rising middle powers who are looking to play a larger role in their respective regional spheres. There are visible areas where interests of Russia and the world majority can be coordinated, based on the features discussed above, both at the bilateral and multilateral level. It also helps Russia rethink its identity at the global stage in an evolving world order and how to position itself depending on the emerging circumstances. It can also be argued that since the term global south does not include Russia and comprises developing countries, this concept allows the latter to bridge this gap – a situation that Beijing has rectified differently by building a format like the G77+China.

At the same time, because in its appeal to the wider world it borrows so heavily from the prevailing trends in the non-western world, it is possible to see the key features of world majority being as applicable under what Mankoff (2024) has called the ‘ideological turn’ under Putin as under a different future government who may or may not have the same domestic outlook as the current rulers; which also adds to its appeal in the Russian foreign policy context.

However, as a way of defining the rest of the world, the argument that a new concept is necessary because ‘international relations lacks convincing tools that it could use to conduct an analysis of the motives driving such a heterogeneous group of countries’ (Bordachev, 2024) would be contested by a large part of the world. This is because under the broad rubric of the global south, such an analysis has

been conducted for decades, beginning with the iteration of the ‘third world’ and later the ‘south’. The following paragraphs will explain how this has been done, and correspondingly, why is it that the world majority fails to add any new understanding of the international system for actors outside Russia. This will be done through a detailed comparison of features of the world majority to those of the global south.

Global South in All but Name?

The development of the global south – from its origins as the third world and south – has been an endeavour through which the post-colonial, non-western world has sought to raise its voice against inequities in the international system. The process involved in the construction of this concept was collective and was borne out of the struggles of the economically weaker newly independent states in a world order created without their participation. The world majority diverges markedly from the global south in these aspects regarding its origin and intent. However, what is comparable are the key features of world majority that Russia highlights when it seeks to engage with the non-western world on the subject. The following comparative study is restricted to this aspect of world majority.

The pragmatic, flexible approach of the concept of world majority is remarkably similar to the ideas that have guided the global south over decades. In fact, in the Kremlin’s official statements, there have been at least two occasions since 2023 when the two terms – global majority and global south – have been used one after the other, as if referring to the same idea. The first was at a CIS Heads of State Council (Putin, 2023i) and the second was during a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Putin, 2024d).

The idea that there is a large part of the world distinct from the west that has advocated for independent foreign policy has been a staple of the intellectual tradition that has emerged out of the development of concepts of third world/south/global south; alongside the emergence of post-colonial identity. Starting at the beginning with the very nomenclature, the idea that the post-colonial world represented the majority of the world has always been at the forefront of the thinking in this part of the world. The Asian-African conference held in 1955 in Bandung (Indonesia) saw participation of 29 countries that already represented over half of the world’s population. Indonesian President Sukarno explicitly noted in his 1955 speech at the conference about how the ‘humanity’s majority’ in Asia and Africa had suffered under colonialism and called for their liberation (Sukarno, 1955). The NAM had 120 countries and the G77 today consists of 134 countries, again constituting the majority of the world. The south has had the majority of the global population for a long time and its share of the global population is rising, due to which it is also called the majority world (Butler, 2007). In more contemporary terms,

an indicator is the list of 125 countries that attended the first Voice of the Global South summit in India in January 2023 (MEA, 2023). So, the idea that the global south is where the majority of the world exists is not new to anyone from this part of the world.

The description of the world majority as not wanting to be guided by anyone again comes from a well-established tradition of the non-aligned movement (NAM). As one of the founders of the non-aligned movement, India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in speech to the lower house of Indian parliament in February 1955 noted: ‘Every country has a right to choose its own path and go along it. We have chosen our path and we propose to go along it, and to vary it as and when we choose’ (Nehru, 1955). He repeated the same message at the international level that year, noting that Asia and Africa are ‘determined not to be dominated in any way by any other country or continent’, reiterating that cooperation with other great countries can only take place as ‘equals’. These ideas translated into corner-stone of the NAM, which sought to avoid the newly independent countries getting entangled in bloc politics of the Cold War era. The NAM was seen as contributing to the ‘genuine independence of states and the democratisation of international relations’ while working towards peace and international cooperation (Appadorai, 1981).

Russian experts argue that the world majority should not be likened to the NAM, which sought to ‘fence itself off and stay outside the acute military-ideological confrontation between the U.S.S.R and the United States’ (MID, 2023a). While the latter was indeed the aim, it was neither a policy of passivity or neutrality, but rather adherence to an independent foreign policy that would not be ‘tied down to any particular line of action because of membership of a Cold War bloc’ (Appadorai, 1981), and one that steadily evolved over the years. For instance, India responded to a request for Sri Lanka for military assistance in 1971 and while not entering into military alliances, there was growing acknowledgment that ‘foreign political entanglements’ could not be avoided (Appadorai, 1981). Indeed, several post-colonial states, given the geopolitical exigencies, ended up tilting towards one bloc or the other over the course of the Cold War period.

The assertion that NAM countries were somehow passive as opposed to the world majority today that are seeking to ‘play an increasingly significant role in international processes’ also does not pass scrutiny. The NAM in its first decade in the 1950s focused on decolonisation and opposition to bloc politics, allowing for a post-colonial agenda to be built. There was also a significant overlap in the membership of the non-aligned movement and the third world (Gangal, 1981), and as most colonial states achieved independence, the key challenge came to be focused on economic challenges. This led to a realignment of the focus on North-South issues under the rubric of New International Economic Order (NIEO). As Swarup (1981) notes, NAM

here provided the principal thrust to the South in calling for reducing the gap between the rich and poor countries, even as its political relevance declined during the 1970s. Despite their economic disadvantages, the third world did not remain a passive actor but actively worked towards building pressure for the creation of a new world trade organisation or to have a conference on trade and development issues (Geldart & Lyon, 1980). This was visible in the 'Joint Declaration of the Developing Countries' in 1963 at the UNGA ahead of the first UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The 'informal group of 75' became the Group of 77 (G77) in 1964 at the UNCTAD I comprising members from Latin America, Africa and Asia, which highlighted unequal trade relations and its resultant problems. The G77 thus became a key 'voice' for the developing world focusing on economic issues, even as political and military issues divided them (Geldart & Lyon, 1980). A decade later, by 1974, the G77 had become active in pressing for reforms of the international economic system, driven by global political and economic events. G77 also entered into the discussions in the IMF and the World Bank, where it acted through the Group of 24 to coordinate positions of developing countries on monetary and development issues in the deliberations and decisions of the Bretton Woods Institutions.

It was around this time the concept of south became more popular, as the main concerns of G77 and NAM were 'North-South rather than East-West' (Geldart & Lyon, 1980), visible in the successful adoption of the declaration on the establishment of a NIEO. The focus of NIEO was on 'improving their terms of trade, increasing development assistance, developed-country tariff reductions', as well as reform of the international monetary system (Louis, 2017). This reflected post-colonial demands for participation in governance of the globalising economy, noting that balanced development was not possible under the existing international economic order set up when most of them were not even independent states (United Nations, 1974). At the 1974 conference, the G77 declared that the responsibility for their poverty lies with the legacies of colonisation and ongoing exploitation of the West (Butler, 2007). The G77 was the developing world coming together as a political bloc (Freeman, 2017). These countries perceived themselves as being at a structural disadvantage in the international economic order given its unjust nature and came together as a political bloc to push for changes through the UN.

In other words, the south has consistently been involved in taking an active role in international processes and were deeply aware of the inequalities of the post-world war 2 system, and neither is a recent revelation for them. Of course, they acknowledged the mismatch between their means and ends in their endeavours at the international level, and this power imbalance was reflected in how the NIEO agenda was never successfully implemented. But this means that the present-day phenomenon of the global south

asserting itself more prominently is a logical progression of realisation of the ideas that were put forth nearly seven decades ago by leaders of newly independent states that have since made strides in taking their place at the helm of world affairs.

Despite their relatively weaker economic and diplomatic position in this period in creating viable alternatives, the resistance to unfair multilateral practices have long been practised by the non-west. Broadly speaking, the ideas that have informed the refusal of much of the developing world to join alliances and pursue interest-based coalitions while focusing on economic issues – ideas that have informed their post-2022 engagement with Moscow – come from principles espoused since the times of the NAM.

A key theme of world majority is dissatisfaction with the existing world order and it being anti-hegemonic in nature. Russian writings speak of the need for a just world order 'without the imposition of standards from outside' (Lukyanov, 2022), and that when Russia talks about it, the idea is welcomed in the non-western world. Some acknowledge that this idea has long been part of the discourse in Asia, Africa and Latin America; and that Russia is not the founder but rather a newcomer to this idea. As noted in previous paragraphs, the global south has always been cognisant of the deep inequalities that have pervaded the political and economic institutions that heralded first the division of the world into two blocs and then the dawn of unipolarity in the immediate post-Cold war years. The various unilateral violations of international law by major powers, the refusal to make multilateral institutions more equitable, dissatisfaction with the western response in helping the developing world deal with the 2008 financial crisis, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have for a long time fed dissatisfaction in the global south (Miliband, 2023), but the inequalities did not emerge only in the post-Cold War period.

In fact, the two parties finding it remarkable at just how much the sentiment has been against these inequities are the two former Cold War rivals. There has been plenty of soul searching in the western academic community about how 'differently' the non-western world has reacted to the war in Ukraine as well as the 'broader global landscape' (Foreign Affairs, 2023). The issues of 'Western double standards and hypocrisy, the decades of neglect of the issues most important' to the non-western world are now being discussed prominently. There is a recognition of the desire of the 'rest of the world' (Hill, 2023) to exert more influence in world affairs and their opposition to western dominance in global decision-making as issues of concern to the global south remain neglected. The rest of the world, in contrast, had been on the agenda for a very long time, constrained mostly by the lack of their economic and political ability to prosecute a challenge to the established powers. The difference today is the degree to which power has shifted towards them – political, economic and diplomatic.

Another feature of world majority in Russia's understanding is that they 'pursue relatively or entirely independent policies' (Bordachev, 2024) when dealing with great powers engaged in competition (the U.S., China and Russia). Again, as is evident from the above discussion, the category of global south already covers this aspect. While in the Cold War era this was reflected in the NAM, in more contemporary times, echoes of this idea are seen in different ways – from India's multi-alignment strategy to ASEAN's rejection of 'zero-sum regional competition and regional dominance by any single power' (Le Thu, 2023) to the refusal to join security alliances. This desire to have independent policy has been particularly helpful to Russia in the case of western sanctions as the non-western world has long been interested in seeking a solution to the western monetary and financial pressures that have been brought to bear on several members of the developing world over the years. Given the rising economic prowess of the developing world, they now have a better chance of resisting external pressures.

The global south has long been home to ideas that Moscow is now discovering to be beneficial to its own position, and rechristening it as the world majority. Due to this, it logically appears to Russia that the global south is not averse to the decline of western dominance in international affairs (Lukyanov, 2022). The ideational part of the Russian effort looks successful because it is mirroring ideas that have an established position in the developing world. But as demonstrated above, in acknowledging the shifts underway in the formation of a new world order, it has not been able to present world majority as a concept that differs in any significant way from the foundations that have been laid by the global south. This also answers the Russian question about why its nomenclature is not catching up – because the ideas it is expressing are already encompassed in the global south – with no need being felt for an external actor to repurpose an already existing ideational category.

In other words, based on the above discussion, the concept does not fulfil a key condition for its widespread acceptance – rendering the world as we know it better understandable and manageable as a result of adoption of a new conceptual framework – raising questions regarding its necessity. It does not bring forth a radical shift in understanding of the world separate from what has already been well established through the development of ideas of the third world/south/global south. In any case, as noted above, Russia does not seek to subsume itself in this category but would rather prefer to move in and out of it depending on the specifics of any case, making it more preferable to take the Chinese approach through engagement in a Russia + Global South format.

Conclusion

Thus, while the value of world majority for Russia as providing guidelines for foreign policy making is evident, its

utility as a meta-category for the rest of the non-western world remains doubtful. This is not only due to the contradictions of world majority as discussed above and its close borrowing from the ideas that have defined the global south over decades. Another problem relates to the effectiveness of such meta-categories themselves. Here, the challenges that have faced the global south give us a glimpse into how the world majority would fare, allowing the former to be used as a useful tool to predict the future direction of the latter.

On the one hand, the idea of global south allowed the formerly third world to build a common identity based on shared concerns, gave them visibility at the world stage that has been used to push for their demands in various international fora, and presented a vision of the international system as distinct from the rules of the post-world war 2 order – proving valuable to the non-western world. However, its value as to the effectiveness in delivering results has been debated for a long time.

A key faultline has been that the identity of the developing world as members of the global south does not always dominate their conduct in world affairs. The multiplicity of individual identities of states of the global south have always clashed with the attempt to bring them under one umbrella. They were never just post-colonial states or members of the south, and this aspect of their identity was never enough to overshadow their diversity. In the subsequent years, their national, regional, developmental and other identities have clashed with those of others in the global south – and the common response has been that the national interests of states have taken precedence in interaction with both fellow members of global south and other major powers. The global south has long followed careful hedging (Spektor, 2023) and balancing strategies in their attempts to expand strategic autonomy whenever possible and maximise national interests. In this regard, the disunity has also hindered an effective pursuit of common goals, which can also be expected to be the case with world majority.

This has been due to both the ability of the developed world to use incentives and pressure on developing countries to fracture coalitional unity as well as the differences among various groups in the developing world. The latter has caused another faultline due to the different rates of growth within the global south that has widened the gap between the interests as well capacities of states within the grouping, with the rising powers not reluctant in exercising their influence within new non-western settings. In the case of G77, while the more economically developed members have undertaken an active role in helping with agenda-setting, it has been noted that an 'increasingly economically and politically diverse membership' has been making consensus increasingly difficult, resulting in weaker positions on issues (Draguljić & Anspach, 2025). In climate change talks, interests of the small island states have been left behind by other developing states (Sealey-Huggins,

2017). As non-western multilateral institutions struggle to ensure policy implementation on the ground on issues of broad regional or global concern through consensual decision-making, a blanket solidarity across a range of issues can be expected to remain elusive under world majority too.

As China's power has risen, it has pursued its own agenda in its engagement with the developing world with particular intensity at least since the 2008 financial crisis. It has already established its own mechanisms like the G77+China to engage with the global south while also building its role in existing global governance institutions. The focus of China has been on expanding its own ideas, values and influence, a process which does not always happen in discussion with the rest of the world. Whether the launch of China-led initiatives like the BRI, AIIB, Global Security Initiative, etc. will lead to a more collaborative, equitable rule-making or a more China-dominated one remains a contested question. Till now, China's enhanced capacity in delivering public goods has led it to build cooperation with the south through connecting it with its own economy, while making the term in itself vague (Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2020). Russia's world majority would also thus face up against Chinese ambitions.

The members also have divergences in their understanding of how a future world order should look like – and that different actors might have different goals with respect to the global south (Bogdanov et al., 2024) – even if they rhetorically support multipolarity and move away from the liberal world order. There is also competition among leading powers for leadership and status gain in the global south – including India and China. Even though Russia might seek to build a new system of international relations through cooperation with non-western institutions (Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, 2022), the inter-state differences in the global south will challenge the ambitions of the world majority.

All of this goes to underscore how difficult it is to use the meta-categories like global south for bringing about shifts in rules of the international system or to emerge as an effective decision-making entity, issues that are yet to be considered by the proponents of world majority. It is unclear how the world majority would address these challenges, also given Russia's limited capacity in this part of the world to significantly shift the balance of power on its own initiative, as seen in the lack of realisation of its grand concepts like Greater Eurasian Partnership and Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf. Russian experts also understand this and highlight that while world majority countries want to create a 'fairer international order, but there may be no force that consolidates them for waging a systematic and structured fight' (Bordachev, 2024); without offering a solution to the challenge that a new concept might bring to the table.

Thus, this article has explained and expanded on the concept of world majority in Russian foreign policy, highlighting its potential value for the country's foreign policy orientation. Through a comparative study of the concept with that of the global south, it has raised doubts about its wider applicability to the non-western world by revealing how it reiterates an old problem in a new language, but without offering novel solutions. In addition, through a critique of the global south, it also predicts the challenges that will face the world majority, given the similarities in their orientations. It also reveals just how difficult delivering a common agenda through such meta-categories is, bringing into question the true value of these large categories beyond identifying patterns that help explain complex events.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Regarding the naming itself, some experts argue that the term world majority is a better option than global majority since the inclusion of the word global – even in terms of global south – is a reference to globalisation that gained currency as a western project and hence not acceptable. It is unclear how the experts reach this conclusion, given that the literature on the global south does not make this connection. The popularity of the term '(Global) South' category has been interpreted as denoting the quest for power or status by large middle-income countries, not only Brazil, China and India but also South Africa, Mexico, Turkey or Indonesia. There exists the argument that the addition of global to the word south highlights the increasing clout of the countries from the south that now also reaches the north in certain cases as well as the interconnections that now exist between the two dyads (Haug et al., 2021). The addition of the term global to the concept of south has been interpreted by some also as a move away from a more economic understanding to one related to a reference to 'unequal power relations, imperialism and neo-colonialism' (Kloß, 2017) while others do not see a major conceptual difference between south and global south given the scope of their agendas. In any case, the Russian government itself has no qualms about using the term.

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