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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Baroud, R. (2023). A 'New Era' in the New Middle East: China, Russia and the Reinvention of the South. *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 4(3), 82-92. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89254-0>

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A 'New Era' in the New Middle East: China, Russia and the Reinvention of the South



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Received: 08.04.2023

Accepted: 02.05.2023

How to cite: Baroud, R. (2023). A 'New Era' in the new Middle East: China, Russia and the reinvention of the South. *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 4(3), 82-92.



ABSTRACT

Who would have expected that the BRICS nations could rise and become the potential rival of the G7 countries, the World Bank and the IMF combined? That once seemingly distant possibility now has real prospects which could change the equilibrium of world politics. The more successful BRICS becomes, the weaker Western hegemony over the South will be. Although some Western politicians and media insist on downplaying the group's role in shaping the new world order, the change seems real and irreversible. Even before the Ukraine war commenced in February 2022, much evidence pointed to the fact that Russia and China's goal was hardly temporary or impulsive. The very language of multipolarity has defined both countries' discourse for years, a discourse that was mostly inspired by the two countries' displeasure with US militarism from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, their frustration with Washington's bullying tactics whenever a disagreement arises, be it in trade or border demarcations, the punitive language, the constant threats, the military expansion of NATO and much more. While it is too early to determine, with any degree of certainty, the winners and losers of this new configuration, it is almost certain that a US-western-dominated world is no longer possible.

Keywords: BRICS, Sino-Arab relations, Global South, New Era, New Middle East

Introduction

THE WORLD IS CHANGING. IT HAS BEEN undergoing a seismic change that long preceded the Russian-Ukraine war and the recent US-Chinese tensions in the Strait of Taiwan.

What has taken place since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, and the provocative visit by then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in August of the same year (Huang, 2022), is an acceleration of existing global shifts that ranged from the emergence of new economic alliances, geopolitical formations, turf wars and, of course, competing political discourses. These changes are fully displayed in the Middle East, Africa, and, indeed, much of the Global South.

The New Economic Model

Who would have expected that the BRICS nations could rise and become the potential rival of the G7 countries, the World Bank and the IMF combined? That once seemingly distant possibility now has real prospects which could change the equilibrium of world politics.

BRICS - an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - was supposedly coined (Goldman Sachs, n.d.) by the Chief Economist of Goldman Sachs in 2001 as a reference to the world's emerging economies. It was then known as BRIC; the "S" came later when South Africa formally joined the group in 2010.

The group's first official summit was held in 2009. Back then, the discussion seemed largely abstract. It wasn't until 2014 that BRICS began taking serious steps towards greater integration when the nascent alliance, now including South Africa, launched the New Development Bank with seed money of \$50 billion (NDP, 2023). This decision meant that the group was now ready to take its first practical steps in challenging the dominance of the West over international monetary institutions, namely the World Bank and the IMF.

For decades, the US's greatest weapon has been the dollar which, with time, stopped being a normal currency per se and became a commodity.

The global geopolitical conflict resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war has driven the massive expansion underway at BRICS, especially as financially powerful countries have shown interest in the initiative. They include Argentina, the UAE, Mexico, Algeria and, particularly, Saudi Arabia.

Recent financial reports suggest that BRICS is already the world's largest gross domestic product (GDP) bloc. It currently contributes 31.5 percent to the global GDP, ahead of the G7, which contributes 30.7 percent (Raghavan, 2023). One of the greatest opportunities and challenges facing BRICS now is its ability to expand its membership base while maintaining its current growth. Helping new members maintain economic and political independence is particularly vital.

The IMF and World Bank are notorious for basing their financial support of countries, especially in the Global South, on political conditions. This is often justified under the guise of human rights and democracy, although it is related entirely to privatization and opening markets for foreign investors, usually Western corporations. As BRICS strengthens, it will have the potential to help poorer countries without pushing a self-serving political agenda or indirectly manipulating and controlling local economies.

With inflation hitting many Western countries, resulting in slower economic growth and causing social unrest, nations in the Global South are taking the opportunity to develop their economic alternative. This means that groups like BRICS will cease being exclusively economic institutions. The struggle is now very political.

Rivaling the Dollar

For decades, the US's greatest weapon has been the dollar which, with time, stopped being a normal currency per se and became a commodity. Wars have been fought to ensure that countries like Iraq and Libya remain committed to the dollar (Recknagel, 2000). Following the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Baghdad returned to selling oil in US dollars. This struggle over the dollar's dominance was also felt painfully in Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves and yet was reduced to abject poverty for attempting to challenge the supremacy of Washington and its ubiquitous currency (Worldometer, 2023).

Although it will take time, the process of reducing international reliance on the US dollar is now in full swing. In March 2023, Brazil and China announced a trade agreement allowing them to use their currencies, the real and the yuan, res-



Leaders attending the 42nd Southeast Asian Nations Association (ASEAN) Summit pose for a group photo outside the event in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, on May 10, 2023. (Xinhua, 2023)

pectively (Betz, 2023). This step shall prove consequential, encouraging other South American countries to follow suit. The move was neither the first of its kind nor will it be the last.

One of the main decisions taken by finance ministers and central bank governors of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at their March 2023 meeting in Indonesia was to reduce their reliance on the US dollar (Devonshire, 2023). They agreed to “reinforce financial resilience... through the use of local currency to support cross-border trade and investment in the ASEAN region.” This, too, is a game changer.

The BRICS countries are leading the charge and are set to facilitate the rearrangement of the world’s economic and financial map (Seidel, 2023). While the West is busy trying to keep its economies afloat, it remains wary of the changes underway in the Global South. Washington and

other Western capitals are worried. They ought to be.

Following a meeting between US President Joe Biden and 40 African leaders at the White House in December 2022, it was clear that African countries were not interested in taking sides in the ongoing war in Ukraine (Abutaleb & Ryan, 2022). Consequently, US Vice President Kamala Harris flew to Africa on March 26, 2023, to meet regional leaders to push them away from China and Russia (Signe, 2023). That effort is likely to fail. A perfect demonstration of Africa’s refusal to abandon its neutrality was seen at the press conference between Harris and Ghana’s President, Nana Akufo-Addo, on March 28. “There may be an obsession in America about Chinese activity on the continent,” Akufo-Addo told reporters, “but there is no such obsession here.” (Wootson, 2023)

Arguing that BRICS is a purely economic group ignores much of the story. The timing of its expansion, the stern political discourse of its members, potential members, and allies, the repeated visits by top Russian and Chinese diplomats to Africa and other regions in the Global South, and so on, all indicate that BRICS has become the South's new platform for geopolitics, economics, and diplomacy.

The more successful BRICS becomes, the weaker Western hegemony over the South will be. Although some Western politicians and media insist on downplaying the group's role in shaping the new world order, the change seems real and irreversible.

'The New Era'

Since the Sykes-Picot was signed in 1916 between old colonial powers, France and Britain, with a minor, but still significant involvement of Tsarist Russia, the Middle East and North Africa, along with Central Asia, was divided into various spheres of influence (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). Global priorities then were almost entirely Western. The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 was a watershed moment in world history, as it sowed the seeds for a possibility of a new global bloc to rival Western domination (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

It took decades for that new bloc to emerge. In 1955, the Warsaw Pact was born (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023), unifying the Soviet Union and its allies against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a Western military alliance that saw the light six years earlier (Haglund, 2023). The rivalry between both camps was expressed in fierce economic competition, a political Cold War, a low-grade military conflict, and two ideological discourses that defined our understanding of world politics in much of

the 20th Century. All of this came to a bitter end in the early 1990s. NATO won, while the Warsaw Pact disintegrated rapidly and in the most humiliating fashion. It was "the end of history," Francis Fukuyama declared (Fukuyama, 1993). It was the age of Western triumphalism and, by extension, more colonial wars, starting in Panama, then Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

China factored in all this, not as a major global political player, but as a worthy adversary and prized ally. The historic visit by US President Richard Nixon to Beijing in 1972 thwarted efforts to unify the East as US-Western imperialism (Kraus, 2022). That trip, which supposedly 'changed the world,' per the assessment of then-Ambassador Nicholas Plat, was, indeed, consequential. It was the beginning of the end of the Soviet as it gave Washington a massive advantage over rivals. But history is now being reversed in ways a few geopoliticians have successfully predicted.

Enter Xi Jinping

The final exchange, caught on camera between visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian host and counterpart, Vladimir Putin, summed up the current geopolitical conflict, still in its nascent stages, between the United States and its Western allies on the one hand, and Russia, China and their allies, on the other (Davidson & McCurry, 2023). Xi was leaving the Kremlin following a three-day visit, starting on March 20, that can only be described as historic. "Change is coming that hasn't happened in 100 years, and we are driving this change together," Xi said while clasping Putin's hand. "I agree," Putin replied while holding Xi's arm. "Please take care, dear friend," he added (Muzaffar, 2023).

In no time, social media exploded by sharing that scene repeatedly. Corporate Western media analysts

went into overdrive, trying to understand what these few words meant. “Is that part of the change that is coming, that they will drive together?” Ian Williamson questioned in *The Spectator* (Williams, 2023). Though he did not offer a straight answer, he alluded to one: “It is a chilling prospect, for which the West needs to be prepared.”

Xi’s statement was, of course, uttered by design. It means that the strong Chinese-Russian ties, and possible future unity, are not an outcome of immediate geopolitical interests resulting from the Ukraine war or a response to US provocations in Taiwan. Even before the Ukraine war commenced in February 2022, much evidence pointed to the fact that Russia and China’s goal was hardly temporary or impulsive (CNN, 2022). Indeed, it runs deep.

The very language of multipolarity has defined both countries’ discourse for years, a discourse that was mostly inspired by the two countries’ displeasure with US militarism from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, their frustration with Washington’s bullying tactics whenever a disagreement arises, be it in trade or border demarcations, the punitive language, the constant threats, the military expansion of NATO and much more.

One month before the war, I argued with my co-writer, Romana Rubeo, that both Russia and China might be at the cusp of some kind of unity. That conclusion was drawn based on a simple discourse analysis of the official language emanating from both capitals and the actual deepening of relations. At the time, we wrote:

“Some kind of an alliance is already forming between China and Russia. The fact that the Chinese people are taking note of this and are supporting their government’s drive towards greater integration – political, economic and geostrategic – between Beijing and Moscow indicates that the informal and potentially formal alliance is a long-term strategy

for both nations (Baroud & Rubeo, 2022)”.

Even then, like other analysts, we did not expect such a possibility to be realized so quickly. The Ukraine war, in itself, was not indicative that Moscow and Beijing would grow closer. Instead, Washington’s response, threatening and humiliating China, did most of the work. The visit by Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022 was a diplomatic disaster (Singleton, 2022). It left Beijing with no alternative but to escalate and strengthen its ties with Russia, hoping the latter would fortify its naval presence in the Sea of Japan. In fact, this was the case.

But the “100 years” reference by Xi tells of a much bigger geopolitical story. As Washington continues to pursue aggressive policies – with US President Joe Biden prioritizing Russia and his Republican foes prioritizing China as the main enemy of the US – the two Asian giants are now forced to merge into one unified political unit with a common political discourse. “We signed a statement on deepening the strategic partnership and bilateral ties which are entering a new era,” Xi said in his final statement (RFE/RL, 2023).

This ‘no-limits friendship’ (Robinson, 2023) is more feasible now than ever, as neither country is constrained by ideological confines or competition. Moreover, they are both keen on ending the US global hegemony, not only in Asia and the Pacific but also in Africa, the Middle East and, eventually, worldwide.

On the first day of Xi’s visit to Moscow, Russia’s President Putin issued a decree in which he wrote off debts of African countries worth more than \$20 billion (Eruyur, 2023). Moreover, he promised that Russia is “ready to supply the whole volume sent during the past time to African countries particularly requiring it, from Russia free of charge ..” (TASS, 2023) should Moscow decide “not to extend the (grain) deal in sixty days.”

For both countries, Africa is a major ally in the upcoming global conflict. The Middle East, too, is vital. The April 6, 2023 agreement, which normalized ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is earth-shattering, not only because it ended seven years of animosity and conflict but because the arbitrator was no other than China itself. Beijing is now a peace broker in the very Middle East dominated by failed US diplomacy for decades (Gritten, 2023).

What this means for the Palestinians remains to be seen, as too many variables remain at work. But for these global shifts to serve Palestinian interests in any way, the current leadership, or a new leadership, would have to slowly break away from its reliance on Western handouts and validation and, with the support of Arab and African allies, adopt a different political strategy.

Regions that have long been dominated by the US and its Western allies are processing the changes and potential opportunities.

The US government, however, continues to read the situation entirely within the Russia-Ukraine war context. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken responded to Xi's trip to Moscow by saying that "the world should not be fooled by any tactical move by Russia, supported by China or any other country, to freeze the war (in Ukraine) on its own terms (The Telegraph, 2023)". It is rather strange but also telling that the outright rejection of the potential call for a ceasefire was made by Washington, not Kyiv.

Xi's visit, however, is truly historic from a geopolitical sense. It can indeed be compared, in both scope and possible consequences, to Nixon's visit to Beijing, which contributed to the deterioration of ties between the Soviet Union and China under

Chairman Mao Zedung (Kraus, 2022). The improved relationship between China and the US helped Washington further extend its global dominance while putting the USSR on the defensive. The rest is history, one that was rife with geostrategic rivalry and divisions in Asia, thus, ultimately, the rise of the US as the uncontested power in that region.

Regions that have long been dominated by the US and its Western allies, like the Middle East and Africa, are processing these changes and potential opportunities. If this geopolitical shift continues, the world will, once again, find itself divided into camps. While it is too early to determine, with any degree of certainty, the winners and losers of this new configuration, it is almost certain that a US-western-dominated world is no longer possible.

China and the New Middle East

An obvious problem with most Western media's political analyses is that they tend to be short-sighted and focused mostly on variables that are of direct interest to Western governments. These analyses are now being applied to understanding official Arab attitudes towards Russia, China, global politics and conflicts.

As Chinese President Xi Jinping prepares to lead a large delegation to meet with Arab leaders in Saudi Arabia in December 2023, Western media conveys a sense of dread. The Chinese leader's visit "comes against the backdrop" of the Biden Administration's "strained ties with both Beijing and Riyadh" over differences, supposedly concerning "human rights and Russia's invasion of Ukraine," Reuters reported (El Yaakoubi & Zhu, 2022).

The same line of reasoning was parroted, with little questioning, by many other major Western media sources, falsely suggesting that 'human rights', along with other righteous reasons, are the main priority

of the US and Western foreign policy agenda. And, since these analyses are often shaped by Western interests, they tend to be selective in reading the larger context. If one is to rely exclusively or heavily on the Western understanding of the massive geopolitical changes worldwide, one will surely be misled. Western media wants us to believe that the strong political stances taken by Arab countries, such as neutrality in the case of war (El Yaakoubi & Zhu, 2022), growing closeness to China and Russia, lowering oil output, etc., are solely to 'send a message' to Washington or to punish the West for intervening in Arab affairs (Sheppard, Brower, & Al-Atrush, 2022).

However, seen through a wider lens, these assumptions are either half-truths or entirely fabricated. For example, the OPEC+ decision to lower oil output in October 2023 was the only reasonable strategy to apply when the global market's demand for energy was low (Meredith, 2022). Additionally, Arab neutrality is an equally reasonable approach considering that Washington and its Western allies are not the only global forces that matter to the Arabs. It is equally untrue that the Middle East's growing affinity with Asia is borne out of recent dramatic events, but a process that began nearly two decades ago, specifically a year following the US invasion of Iraq. In 2004, China and the Arab League established the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) (BRICS Policy Center, 2016).

The Forum

CASCF officially represented the Chinese government and all 22 members of the Arab League, eventually serving as the main coordination platform between China and the Arabs. This has given China the advantage of investing in a collective strategy to develop trade, economic and political ties with the entirety of the Arab world. On the other hand, Arabs

had the leverage of negotiating major economic deals with China that could benefit multiple Arab states simultaneously.

An extremely important caveat is that CASCF was predicated in what is known as the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (Jiabao, 2004). Based on the Westphalian norms of state sovereignty, the five principles seem to be founded on an entirely different paradigm of foreign relations, compared to the West's approach to the Middle East and the Global South, in general, extending from the colonial periods to the neo-colonialism of post-World War II: mutual respect for "territorial integrity and sovereignty", "non-aggression", "non-interference", and so on.

Chinese-Arab relations follow this model to this day, with very little deviation. This validates the claim that collective Arab political attitudes towards China and Xi's visit to the Middle East are hardly an outcome of any sudden shift of policies resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war. This is not to suggest that Arab and Chinese relations with the US and the West had no impact on the nature of the speed of Chinese-Arab ties. Indeed, the Chinese model of 'peaceful coexistence' seems to challenge the henceforth *modus operandi* at work in the Middle East.

In 2021, China announced projects to build a thousand schools in Iraq, a piece of news that occupied substantial space in Arab media coverage (AFP, 2021). The same can be said about China's growing economic – not just trade – influence in Arab countries (Freidin, 2022). China's lucrative Belt and Road Initiative, announced in 2013, fits seamlessly into the political infrastructure of Arab-Chinese ties built in previous years (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). According to the Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, Riyadh was the largest recipient of Chinese investments within the BRI during the first half of 2022 (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022).

Starting in March 2022, Saudi Arabia agreed in principle to sell its oil to China using the Chinese Yuan instead of the US dollar (Said & Kalin, 2022). This decision was confirmed a few months later during Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia in December. Once fully implemented, it will have irreversible repercussions on the global market and the dollar's future status. Assuming that such mammoth changes in global geopolitics were an outcome of the immediate need for the Arabs to 'send a message' will continue to impair the West's ability to truly appreciate that the changes underway, not only in the Middle East but worldwide, are part of permanent shifts to the world's political map. The sooner the West achieves this realization, the better.

Considering all of this, it would be misguided to suggest that large political entities like China and Arab countries combined are shaping their foreign policy agendas, thus staking their futures, on knee-jerk political reactions to the attitude of a single American President or administration.


Conclusion

The road ahead is not entirely clear. But numerous signs, accompanied by tangible changes, suggest that the world, as a whole, is changing. However, this change is more visible in some regions than others. The geopolitical tug-of-war between old and new global superpowers is most visible in the Middle East and Africa, in addition, of course, to the East Asia and Pacific regions. Each one of these regions also has its own re-ordering of power dynamics.

In the Middle East, for example, Iran seems to be breaking away from its West-imposed isolation, while Saudi Arabia is challenging its old client regime status. The latter move is particularly troubling for Washington, as it challenges two layers of Western domination of the Middle East, that which followed

the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, thus dividing the region into sub-regions under Western 'protection' and influence, and also the post-Iraq invasion-Middle East, which consequently was seen as the exclusive domain of the United States, Israel, and their western allies.

Russia and China are now staking claims in the region, though using mechanisms wholly removed from the Western style of old colonialism and neo-colonialism. While the Russians are tapping into their long Soviet tradition of cooperation, the Chinese are resorting to a more ancient history of friendly trade and cultural exchanges. Now that Beijing has developed a more candid and unapologetic approach to foreign policy, China's status as a new superpower shall demonstrate its effectiveness in the Middle East in unprecedented ways. The Iran-Saudi Accords were a tremendous achievement for the new politically-oriented China. However, the road ahead is still challenging, as the region is rife with foreign contenders and old and new conflicts. For China to succeed, it must present itself as the new just and fair model, away from the West and its violent legacy.

(The managing editor of the Palestine Chronicle, Italian journalist Romana Rubeo made significant contributions to this article.) 

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