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Περιφέρεια | Regional Integration: Politics, Economics, Governance - Δομικές μεταβάσεις και πολυκρίσεις στην παγκόσμια οικονομία: Προκλήσεις για την περιφερειακή οικονομική ολοκλήρωση

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Global turbulence, emerging powers and the regional integration potential in the Global South

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Abstract

During the past decade the world has witnessed an increase of developments that are shaking the global status quo. Among others, China-US/West economic frictions and the Russian invasion in Ukraine are leading to a retreat of globalization, with emphasis being given to regional production networks and value chains. Likewise, there are signs of reorganization or reinforcement of regional integration schemes such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and South-South cooperation fora such as the BRICS in view of failure of global governance structures to optimally address the various issues raised. This article explores these developments and highlights how the alternatives created by the emergence of new “grand” actors are producing a potential bandwagoning effect in the Global South.

Keywords: regional integration, South-South relations, emerging powers, SCO, BRICS.

Παγκόσμιες αλλαγές, αναδυόμενες δυνάμεις και η δυναμική της περιφερειακής ολοκλήρωσης στον Παγκόσμιο Νότο

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Περίληψη

Κατά την τελευταία δεκαετία ο κόσμος έχει γίνει μάρτυρας μιας αύξησης εξελίξεων που κλονίζουν το παγκόσμιο status quo. Μεταξύ άλλων, οι οικονομικές τριβές μεταξύ Κίνας-ΗΠΑ/Δύσης και η ρωσική εισβολή στην Ουκρανία οδηγούν σε υποχώρηση της παγκοσμιοποίησης, δίνοντας έμφαση σε περιφερειακά δίκτυα παραγωγής και αλυσίδες αξίας. Ομοίως, υπάρχουν ενδείξεις που αναδεικνύουν την αναδιοργάνωση ή την ενίσχυση σχημάτων περιφερειακής ολοκλήρωσης, όπως ο Οργανισμός Συνεργασίας της Σαγκάης και fora συνεργασίας Νότου - Νότου, όπως τα BRICS, ενόψει της αποτυχίας των δομών παγκόσμιας διακυβέρνησης να αντιμετωπίσουν τα διάφορα ζητήματα που ανακύπτουν. Το παρόν άρθρο διερευνά αυτές τις εξελίξεις και υπογραμμίζει πως οι εναλλακτικές λύσεις που δημιουργούνται από την ανάδυση νέων «μεγάλων» δρώντων παράγουν ένα δυνητικό φαινόμενο band-wagoning στον Παγκόσμιο Νότο.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: περιφερειακή ολοκλήρωση, σχέσεις Νότου-Νότου, αναδυόμενες δυνάμεις, Οργανισμός Συνεργασίας της Σαγκάης, BRICS.

1. Introduction

During the last couple of decades the world has seen tremendous changes. All analyses highlight the fluid global environment with the financial field giving its place to the health field that has more recently been overshadowed by the security one. All these developments are made possible by major shifts in power distribution on a global scale but they are also reinforcing further power redistribution in their turn. In times like these, with clear international responses being in doubt, states are expected to further rely on those more closely affiliated with, with regional integration schemes and specialized fora being the most promising vehicles.

Interestingly, and contrary to the G-20 2023 declaration's main title, "One Earth- One Family – One Future", international relations specialists are found more and more in the position of being required to use specific groupings of the world, such as the Global North/West and the Global South, in order to explain major developments in the economic, trade and even security sectors.

In this fluid period, regional integration schemes and different fora are being reactivated: remarkably, relevant institutions in the Global North seem to become more closed and protective (see for example EU's latest directions over FDI from third parties or the rejuvenation of G-7 meetings) while those in the Global South are opting for further integration but also expansion of membership.

2. Changes in the global scene

Since the start of the global financial crisis of 2007-8 a growing number of indications and developments highlighting a trend towards deglobalization are being noted, with this trend being maintained and even reinforced during the second part of the 2010s. Although the term is not new, and has been used to describe the retreat of financial interactions between states during periods in time (i.e. 1930s, 2010s), a series of developments are pushing forward a reorganization of value chains and production networks as well as trade routes, giving emphasis to mostly regional networks as opposed to global ones.

Undeniably, the trade friction between China and the US that started in 2018 had a great negative effect on economic globalization. The sudden increase of tariffs by the US during 2018, up to a level of nearly 50% regarding imports from China, and the relevant retaliation of Beijing, created significant turbulence in international trade. Indeed, sectors such as those of steel, solar panels, aluminum, soy beans, automobiles and others were significantly affected (Dollar 2018).

In effect, the continuation of obstacles to trade, even with the change of US administration to Joe Biden, has led to China being placed number three trade partner of the US (from first position prior to 2018) and many American and Chinese companies avoiding doing business in the two countries, highlighting the relevant risk (US Census Bureau 2023). Even if there is a growing debate on whether this *trade war* has been beneficial to the US economy (Brown 2019, Siripurapu and Berman 2022), the new US president moved forward with more

specialized trade tools targeting new technology advancements, e.g. imposing restrictions to exports to China related to the semiconductors sector, again to receive a corresponding response from China – focusing on exports of metals required for the production of semiconductors. This *technology protectionism* as García-Herrero and Tan (2020) call it, is producing again significant turbulence on trade routes and collaboration business networks. Nevertheless, talks among the two trade superpowers are still ongoing in an attempt to find common ground that will address both parties' concerns (Reuters 2023).

Though the trade war had mainly in focus the two economies, as global networks involved various other stakeholders, it started affecting overall trade routes and value chains. According to Bruegel (García-Herrero and Tan 2020) the US-China decoupling is accelerating de-globalization trends witnessed since the 2007-8 global financial crisis, calculating that the *degree of integration of global value chains* declined to levels below 46% (from more than 50% in their peak just before the crisis). Hence, the decoupling between China and the US has overall implications on the international level.

The Covid period has also created significant turbulence in the global arena. Not only did the world witness a decline in trade volumes and numbers of people travelling (Vidya and Prabheesh 2020) but it also brought about an increase of nationalism: Kronprobst and Paul (2021) call it a *decline of global governance capacities* with the low levels of cooperation between different states, primarily China in the first part of the crisis, as well as the decision of President Trump to exit the World Health Organization during a global health crisis at a time when the organization required the most support.

According to Irwin (2020), globalization reached its peak in 2008 with the period after that being conditioned by weak levels of trade increase, an era of “*slowbalization*” as it coined it. With the further restrictions on medical equipment and vaccines exports throughout the world, Covid made it apparent that globalization and most importantly the liberal world order was in retreat. With decreased levels on movement of people, products and capital, the Covid era certainly was reinforcing de-globalization (Economist 2020).

Of course the invasion of Russia in Ukraine further enhanced the deterioration of international trade volumes and overall trade disturbance increased. Though there are signs of trade diversion, even to the level that West-imposed embargo is being bypassed to a certain degree, trade flows in a number of critical products, including the important energy and food sectors, have been much affected by the invasion. For example, Ahn et al. (2023) highlight the issues created on grain and oilseed trade, while Yagi and Managi (2023) went further in assessing the negative spillover, effects of the rising energy prices due to the invasion. Interestingly, Gutmann et al. (2023) analyzed the impact of the Russian invasion and its effect on trade on the levels of support of globalization and trade openness of people in Austria, highlighting the additional, secondary effects of trade disruption on embracing globalization vis-à-vis economic nationalism.

Most importantly though, there are indications that the new trend also involves a de-globalization trend in *political terms*. As Paul and Kornprobst (2021) frame it in their special issue in *International Affairs* journal titled “Deglobalization? The future of the liberal international order” we are also witnessing a retreat of the liberal international order. Though the pillar of the liberal world order related to the promotion of liberal democracy was not internalized by all states and to the same extent, see for example the cases of Russia, China and others, undeniably trade openness was well accepted. To that end one has to count for the valuable contribution of international institutions that had allowed for a fruitful international system to both function and further push for more trade liberalization and collaboratively finding solutions to regional and global issues. Institutions such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF, the GATT and later on the WTO have created what is closer to a global government: states from all over the world would gather around a discussion table to agree upon general terms on how to function in any given area. Though there were ups and downs within this system, in general terms it was accepted as a well-functioning one, allowing for a limit of frictions.

This system has been gradually eroded, primarily due to its inability to modernize and reinvent itself based on contemporary status quo. Indeed, the general argument against these institutions' legitimacy, and therefore their ability to work effectively, is that they represent on the status quo of the late 1940s or at best of the 1970s: the *West* enjoys a prestigious position while the *South's* worldviews are not allowed to much affect the relevant discussions. This was made more apparent since the 1990s during which the Global South started to position itself and its interests more dynamically, as highlighted by the slow progress on further trade liberalization or the failure to conclude a new round of trade negotiations after the Uruguay one (Ostry 2002).

The 2007-8 crisis brought a new reality with the solution requiring for a much broader body than the G-7 to act together, hence the “institutionalization” of the G-20. The funding boost of the IMF and the World Bank, this time much from the side of emerging powers such as China and Brazil, also exposed the new positioning of such countries in the global landscape. The formulation of the BRICS was based among others on the voicing of concerns of how international institutions operate and how limited the opinion of the Global South is within them. In more practical terms this was translated into a demand for enhanced voting rights in the World Bank and the IMF – with a partial win during 2010 (see for example the Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders Yekaterinburg, Russia, June 16, 2009).

With the western economies overcoming the negative effects of the crisis the reluctance to give up part of their special position in international institutions was rejuvenated, with even the 2010 agreement on World Bank and IMF voting rights redistribution being activated as late as January 2016.

Hence, a strong concern on how the pillars of liberal world order function continues to be voiced by many developing states, primarily emerging ones and fora like the BRICS. The long pending reform of the Security Council of the UN, the selection process of the heads of the World Bank and the IMF, the conclusion

of trade talks with a pro developing economies dimension, etc., are hurting the engagement and support of international institutions from the Global South part.

Nevertheless, the Global North has also acted against the positioning of these institutions in the global arena. Further to their reluctance to agree on further reforms of such institutions, both the US and the EU have disregarded the procedures within them when it did not serve their interests. For example, during trade talks the US and the EU, sometimes with the company of other Global North representatives – for example Canada, would separately from other states and in advance discuss and set specific common positions. These positions, enhanced by the backing of these trade superpowers, would be consequently pushed for ratification, often without any change, by either the GATT or the WTO. Likewise, G-20 summits have been conditioned by common positions created by G-7 summits that preceded them (Tops 2023).

The US under the Trump administration pushed even more towards the decrease of the sense of validity of international institutions as it would disregard agreed processes (see for example WTO rules on imposing tariffs) and threaten to or even initiate processes of leaving such institutions (see for example US exit from the WHO).

More emphatically related to the trend of de-globalization, though, has been the issue with the renewal of the members of the Appellate Body of the WTO. The US has refrained from allowing the renewal of the emptied seats of this body that is essential for the Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM) to function. The DSM is of course one of the most important features of the WTO when focusing on liberal world order and institutional legitimacy, as it allows for any member of the WTO (including Global South countries) to either submit claims of wrong doing or defend itself against such claims by others. The US argument that they are against the renewal of emptied seats because this body does not represent American interests constitutes another hit in the acceptance of such international institutions as the right mechanisms to govern global issues. As Paul (2021) puts it “under Trump, US policies became transactional, challenging international institutions”. If an international institution could be utilized for projecting US/Global North power then it was labeled as a good one, in effect opposing the core liberal idea that all relevant institutions should allow for finding solutions to global issues or leading to agreed collective action – such as for example in the recent cases of Syria, global warming or Covid.

Finally, though it is yet to be fully analyzed as a recent development, the freezing of Russian assets abroad, and especially those of the Russian Central Bank, has created a relevant heated debate. Is such action lawful in terms of international law? Especially since the freezing is not conducted by the one primarily hurt by the invasion (i.e. Ukraine) but by others (in effect the G-7). If it is not legally acceptable how secure are the assets of other Global South countries that are deposited abroad? And though there are precedents (see for example the case in Iraq, Syria and most recently Afghanistan) most of them were connected with Security Council decisions. Moreover, the fact that freezing of assets were expanded to Russian

oligarchs made the anxiety of other Global South states stronger – who and in what grounds decides whether it is permissible to freeze assets usually protected under the right to property (CNN 2023c)? And if in the case of Venezuela assets in the US (directed to Venezuelan Opposition Leader Guaidó – NYTimes 2019) one could declare that it was related to a widely isolated and weaker country, what precedent is set in the case of a powerful country such as Russia? (for this discussion see Brookings 2022, Stephan 2022, Kamminga 2023, Moiseienko 2022).

These risks are setting the liberal world order, the legitimacy of the current status quo and the acceptance of current international agreements and institutions into question. A potential answer to this questioning can be alternative structures, with the condition that such structures are available. And as the world trade landscape seems to partially break into regional spheres, regional integration schemes can also serve as alternatives.

3. Alternative structures

Indeed, the world has gradually witnessed new institutions and initiatives that offer alternative options to the existing ones. See for example the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the New Development Bank (or BRICS Bank) (NDB) that have recently (since the mid-2010s) launched their operations and are promoting a different way of conducting their business. Being led by the Global South and to a certain degree enclosing a different operational culture, these institutions can act as alternatives to existing international tools and organizations. To be fair, founding declarations of such institutions stressed, and are still stressing, their non-competition element with other international institutions, nevertheless they could constitute potential vehicles of a different world order in the future, especially one in which the Global South has a stronger voice. Hence, even if for example the NDB has signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with the World Bank and other international/regional banks, it can offer the platform for an alternative to the World Bank at some point in time (NBD 2023).

If one also takes into account that most of these institutions have been created since the start of the de-globalization trend and were further reinforced during the mid-2010s, when the Global North, having overcome the negative effects of the global financial crisis, started returning to its original game of play within international institutions, a viewpoint of these new Global South empowered institutions as potential challengers of the existing status quo is reinforced.

Likewise, as it is going to be more thoroughly described in the following sections, the world has also witnessed increased activity in regional integration schemes. Following the Russian push for the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014/5, partially as a response to the developments under the first Ukrainian crisis, regional integration schemes across the Global South have been sort of reactivated, also empowered by the gradual retreat to a more regionally focused international trade landscape. Most importantly, this trend has also expanded more recently to regional groupings that are not primarily trade focused, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Hence, the stepping stones to further trade liberalization as regional integration schemes were understood by the GATT/WTO doctrine, can potentially also act as alternatives to a liberal world order led by the Global North.

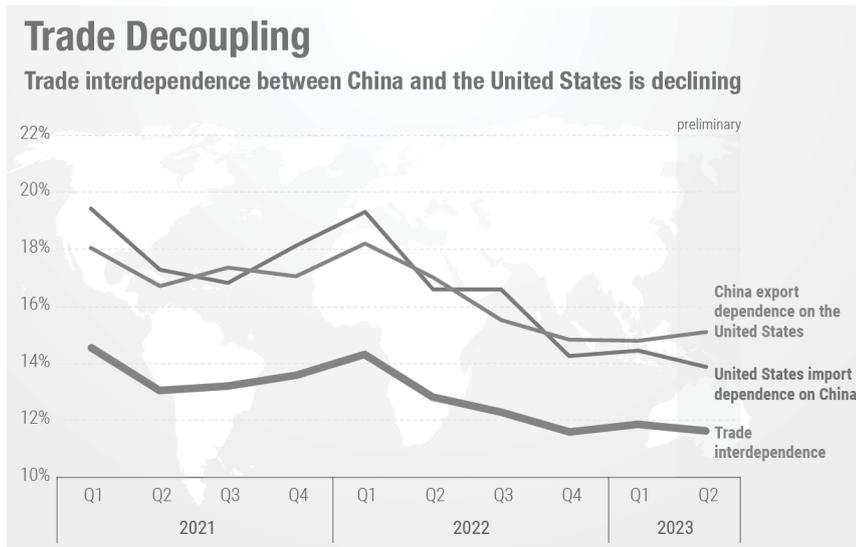
4. Theoretical underpinnings

Undeniably one of the core discussions in International Relations discipline in the recent decades has been that of China challenging the hegemonic position of the US. This is not unexpected, in the words of Layne (2018: 110) “over time...the relative power of states changes, and eventually the international order no longer reflects the actual distribution of power...the legitimacy of the prevailing order is called into question, and it will be challenged by the rising power(s).” According to Kim (2019) the US-China trade conflict that has reinforced de-globalization and enhanced focus on regional interlinkages can be understood as a significant sign of the Sino-US competition for global hegemony.

So far it is not certain whether a functional approach to China-US relations will prevail or we are heading to a gradual increase of friction between the two. According to the liberal concept of functionalism the cultivation of common interests and collaboration between two (sometimes confronting) parts leads to further co-operation and interdependence – but with the reinforcement of de-globalization the significance of these common interests could be decreased.

The graph below provides a clear view of the trade decoupling between China and the US, leading to significantly lower levels of trade between the two economies.

Graph 1.
Trade decoupling between the USA and China



Ŧnyř: OECD, June 2023

Nevertheless, as Organski (1958) highlighted, the recorded redistribution of power among different countries, even if not linear as the last two decades have showed us, creates the conditions for destabilizing the existing system and might lead to interstate tensions and possible conflict. This is reinforced by Tammen's (2000) estimation of the 21st century being a period of major changes in world politics, and others (Lemkea and Lemkeb 2003, Chan 2008) that indicate China as the most significant development towards that end.

So the question in line is whether any expected changes will result in a new world order bringing new tools and institutions or the current world order can adapt to these new developments. If the first scenario applies, then what we are witnessing is a permanent split of the world into (at least) two groups much described (but not in full) by the notions of *Global North* and *Global South*. In the case of the second scenario we are in the middle of a power struggle pushing for the reform of the existing world order without in the very end breaking it.

What is certain is that in terms of Hegemonic Stability Theory one can problematize on who the hegemon is during the last couple of years, especially as far as the provision of global goods is concerned. De-globalization was allowed as a push against neo-liberal institutions such as the G7, the World Bank, the WTO, etc., and in favor of national control as portrayed by examples such as the Greek debt crisis, the Brexit, the nationalistic handling of increased refugees waves across the world and of course the 'America First' foreign policy (Ripsman 2021: 1328-9). In effect the expected hegemon that would promote the institutions supposedly reinforcing its hegemonic position was reluctant to do so or acted in the opposite way.

Likewise, analyzing developments under the lens of soft power (see for example Nye 1990, Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, Nye 2004) it is possible that the US foreign policy has lost part of its acceptance during the Trump administration as it acted against the system that itself had established with the acceptance of most other nations across the world.

5. Enhancing South-South integration

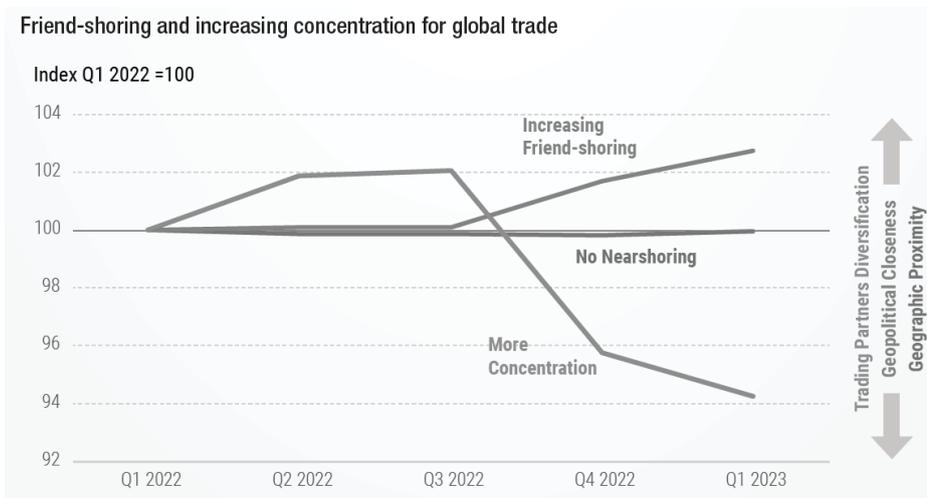
All these developments are taking place in an era of hyper-connectivity. Even though de-globalization is pushing for trade segmentation and a decrease of the strength of global value chains and production lines, we are also noting increases in the *interdependence of the political, commercial, financial, and social spheres* (Kornprobst and Paul 2021). This interconnectedness always had its negative sides but they were not highlighted as strongly as recently before: migration shocks, financial downturns affecting most states and with increased strength, increased inequality, fast spread of new diseases, etc. But as the issues still persist it is imperative that states cooperate for resolving or at least containing them. If the international level is risky, serving more the *Others*, then the regional level or another international level could be an option.

In all scenarios a sort of a *bandwagoning effect* is taking place, with China being the most likely leader of the new option. Of course currently there is a overall agreement that there is a number of emerging states that could serve as (regional) leaders in specific spheres of issues (Alexandroff and Cooper 2010). According to Aydin (2021: 1382) *“Emerging middle powers may have advantages in norm promotion compared to western powers and international organizations...The fact that their own reforms are works-in-progress allows emerging middle powers to avoid the hierarchical relationship that inevitably forms when established democracies seek to diffuse norms to others”*.

Nevertheless, China is found in the leading position in many of the recent developments (BRI, AIIB, NDB, etc.) that tend to have a stronger impact on the international arena. While its activities follow more or less the international liberal world order in terms of trade and finance, it does not of course include the notion of democracy or of economic neoliberalism per se. Nevertheless, this does not seem to significantly affect its acceptance as portrayed in the fact that many from the Global South are taking part in China-led initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB, while even Global North members such as many EU countries tend not to oppose Beijing authoritarianism, at least to the point of opting to not join relevant initiatives (see for example membership of AIIB) (Paul 2021).

The Russian invasion and its effects on international trade as well as the de-globalization trend have moved Global South members closer. In terms of international trade, data reveal a new trend titled *“friend-shoring”*, i.e. promoting trade with countries that are geopolitically closer as measured by the similarity of foreign policy positions based on UN General Assembly voting patterns. This in turn leads to *global trade becoming more concentrated among major trade relationships*.

Graph 2.
International Trade and “friend-shoring”



Πηγή: OECD, June 2023

As more agreements around preferential trade and use of local currencies for bilateral transactions (see for example BRICS deals) are set in place, this trend will be reinforced. Indeed, discussions on the use of local currencies in bilateral transactions have been revitalized since the sanctions against Russia and freezing of Russian assets, based on the fact that the use of the dollar as a transaction medium increases the risk of such development (CNBC 2023, JPMorgan 2023). Though the de-dollarization of the world economy is far from happening in the short- and medium-term, such steps create a more favorable environment of further increasing South-South transactions. More importantly, many such initiatives are being implemented in parallel with further integration or expansion of regional integration schemes.

According to one of the most recent analysis of the position of the dollar within the international financial system conducted by JPMorgan (published on the 31st of August 2023), the dollar still enjoys a dominant position in the world economy.

Analysis of the current position of the dollar reveals that, quiet steadily, it stands for 88% of total foreign exchange volumes. Likewise, the dollar is by far the most used currency for trade invoicing, cross-border liabilities and foreign currency debt issuance. On the other hand, as an IMF 2022 report titled "*The Stealth Erosion of Dollar Dominance*" highlights, we can witness significant changes regarding the currencies used for foreign exchange reserves. In effect, dollar usage for reserves has decreased to a low 58%, with more and more countries selecting other currencies or their own (IMF 2022).

This is also true in the last couple of years regarding international trade with oil and various commodities trade deals being completed via the use of yuan or other than the dollar currencies. For example, Indian refiners importing Russian oil are utilizing dirhams as they complete the purchase through Dubai while commodity producers in Russia are starting issuing bonds in Chinese yuan (Liu and Papa, 2022).

In addition, though most BRICS currencies are connected to approximately 4.1% of total exchanges (the top 4 currencies account for 75.1%) the use of local currencies is gradually eroding dollar's prominent position – for example for the first time ever the chinese yuan topped the dollar with regard to China's international transactions during April-June 2023 (Nikkei 2023).

Nevertheless, economists disregard the possibility of a complete de-dollarization of the world economy, at least in the short to medium term. Instead, a partial de-dollarization could materialize, based on enhancement of regional and of South-South relations. See for example the chinese yuan and its use by countries non-aligned with the US interest and of Beijing's main trading partners (Liu and Papa 2022). In such a scenario the world could see more enforced regional blocks enclosing distinct economic and financial spheres of influence of a small variety of currencies (IMF 2022).

It should be highlighted though that if and when significant levels of de-dollarization does take place, this development would create significant financial turbulence not just to the US and its main allies but also over 60 other currencies that are pegged to the dollar. Especially in the case this change takes effect rather suddenly, some financial disruption is to be expected (IMF 2009). Of course this development would also affect all those that have still at that point significant exposure to the US dollar through holding dollar-valued assets.

A key factor regarding all these potential scenarios are developments in regional groupings and other cooperation initiatives.

5.1 The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The SCO is among the many Global South regional groups that never received much attention by global media until its last summit, held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan during 15 and 16 of September 2022. The main attention was on the presence of Russian president Vladimir Putin, meeting in person his peers from China and India, the first after the invasion in Ukraine. Indeed, the stance of primarily China but also India over the Russian invasion was an important element in global politics, with the western media highlighting the less positive positioning of the two allies of Russia than before (FT 2022).

Nevertheless, the 22nd summit initiated various new initiatives within the regional organization. Primarily being a security-focused organization, SCO had seen less promising developments since its creation in 2001 (with the exception of India and Pakistan joining in 2017). In effect, for many years the organization was characterized by the in and at point competing attempts of China and Russia to control the organization and lead regional developments and the other members trying to balance and maintain independence (Šćepanović 2022). Nevertheless, since the Russian invasion the two countries have come closer, both economically and politically. What was preceded was the visit of Vladimir Putin in China on the 4th of February 2022 and the declaration of a *Friendship between the two States with no limits* (Presidency of Russia 2022). As economic sanctions from the West pushed Russia to find other trade partners, transactions with China grew significantly (Forbes 2022, CNN 2023a). This development affected the course of SCO with many productive talks being launched or even concluded during the 2022 Summit.

Many of these agreements related to the economic/trade sphere, pushing for an economic pillar within the organization. This included the enhanced focus on the SCO Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation Programme and its Action Plan as well as the adoption of the Road Map on Increasing the Share of National Currencies in Mutual Settlements. Likewise, renewed interest was recorded on the potential creation of a SCO Development Bank and the SCO Development Fund (Special Account). Interestingly, during the Summit the progress on transport projects across the region that could further facilitate trade was also thoroughly discussed. (Samarkand Declaration, 2022).

From a (neo)-functional approach, the enhanced push for economy related issues, that in the very end are expected to increase economic transactions and trade relations, could create an additional push factor for enhanced overall relations and a more consolidated approach to global issues. To that end it does not come as a surprise the inclusion in the relevant declaration of the (now) typical request of the Global South with regard to global governance: *“reaffirm the importance of continuing to improve the architecture of global economic governance and will consistently uphold and strengthen an open, transparent, equitable, inclusive and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system...oppose protectionist measures and trade restrictions that are inconsistent with WTO principles...stressed that unilateral application of economic sanctions other than those adopted by the UNSC is inconsistent with the principles of international law and adversely affects third countries and international economic relations”* (Samarkand Declaration 2022, point 63).

Finally, of significant importance was the fact that more countries declared their interest to officially join the organization. In effect, Iran was accepted as a full member (finalized during 2023), the procedure to grant Belarus full membership was commenced while it was also agreed to grant the status of Dialogue Partners to Bahrain, the Maldives, the state of Kuwait, the UAE and Myanmar. Furthermore, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are to be included as new dialogue partners in the near future. Finally, Turkey, a currently dialogue partner, declared its interest to apply for full membership in the future, even though it is a NATO member and much (economically) connected with the West.

This development is emphatic of the trend towards bringing together Central Asia states. Interestingly, the leading position of Russia in the organization did not lead to other countries refraining from participating and joining the organization. Though in all declarations the SCO notes that it is not a group against any other state or group of states, it can be perceived as an anti-western coalition aiming at protecting the group's national and regional interests (Muratbekova 2022).

On the other hand, the 2023 Summit, held during the 4th of July, was conducted online and lasted around half a day. Though it was followed by a joint declaration and two separate agreements on (a) terrorism and (b) digital transformation, it did not allow for many further analyses to take place. Key take-aways could be regarded the mention of SCO as an extended family by Indian Prime Minister Modi (acting as a host) and the note on the SCO Economic Development Strategy 2030 that is being largely embraced by member states (New Delhi Declaration 2023).

5.2 The BRICS

Another group of states that seem to have accelerated its pace due to the de-globalization and current events is the BRICS. The group formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and (later on) South Africa during the end of the 2000s has continued to meet and build up common positions as well as common tools. Contrary to

many analyses during the mid-2010s that were noting the potential demise of the group, the BRICS continued to expand their cooperation in various areas, push for changes in the global governance landscape and also created two new tools, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), more or less the equivalent of the WB and the IMF but (for now) on a regional level.

The latter came during a period of the acceleration of de-globalization and a decrease of trust into the existing procedures within multilateral organizations but then took a path of its own. With the continued trend towards frictions within the institutions of the liberal world order, these tools and the NDB in particular, are being seen as valuable alternatives by many countries, especially within the Global South (Feil and Feijó, 2021).

Under this negative framework related to global governance the BRICS had their first in-person summit since the Covid period during 22-24 August 2023 in Johannesburg, South Africa. International interest in the summit initially focused on whether Russian President Vladimir Putin would take part in the Summit as it was unclear whether South Africa would honor the warrant issued against Mr. Putin by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The issue was resolved by the representation of Russia in the Summit by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (Reuters, 2023b).

Nevertheless, the Summit was recorded as a rather successful one.

The declaration included the usual calls for more Inclusive Multilateralism, with the members expressing their *"concern about the use of unilateral coercive measures, which are incompatible with the principles of the Charter of the UN and produce negative effects notably in the developing world*. Members also highlighted the problems arising from inconsistent with WTO rules trade restrictive measures and called for *reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, including for a greater role for emerging markets and developing countries, including in leadership positions in the Bretton Woods institutions"* (Johannesburg Declaration, 2023).

The latter was always been a crucial issue among the BRICS. According to South Africa's ambassador to the BRICS it is imperative that global governance architecture is redesigned in a way that it becomes more equitable and fair for developing countries, in essence a global governance structure that does not position the West to dictate to the South what is right for them (Alzajeera, 2023b).

Similarly to the SCO 2022 declaration, BRICS pushed for even more increased use of local currencies in international trade and financial transactions between member-states and other trade partners – a call in line with various recent bilateral agreements to act accordingly (see for example India-UAE recent agreement).

Most importantly, the Summit resulted in the invitation of six new countries to become full members. More specifically the Argentine Republic, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were invited to *become full members of BRICS from 1 January 2024* (Johannesburg Declaration, 2023).

This expansion was preceded by the expansion of NDB's membership to include Bangladesh, UAE and Egypt (and with pending accession of Uruguay) and was followed by an announcement that 40 countries had expressed their interest in joining the BRICS and 23 had officially applied (Aljazeera, 2023a).

The Global South element of the group has been quoted as an important factor for these countries being positive into joining. For example the Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Bin Farhan stated that “[the BRICS] proven itself to be a useful and important channel to strengthen economic cooperation with countries of the so-called Global South.” Likewise, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi highlighted that they see the BRICS as a medium for raising the voice of the Global South (CNN, 2023b).

Other analysts have noted that this development is coming after the Covid period under which the Global North has looked after itself through keeping the majority of vaccines for their population and depriving this capability to other countries across the Global South (Reuters, 2023b). According to The Economist coverage (2023), Saudi Arabia and UAE seem to also further push the *recalibration* of their relations with the US while coming closer to China through joining the BRICS.

Regarding how these six countries were selected, there is not yet much information available from official documents. Nevertheless, oil producing countries constitute the majority of the newcomers, most of which are situated in the Middle East – a region in which China and India have a strong presence. The recent role of China in the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the agreement between UAE and India to trade in their local currencies as well as the joint stance of Russia and Saudi Arabia regarding oil production levels, constitute great indicators on the good positioning of most BRICS members in the area. Moreover, it has been an area that had not been covered by the BRICS membership so far and which has moved closer to the Global South camp than ever before.

In addition, the selected countries have a strong position in their regions and can support a trickle-down effect in their respective areas, with most of them covering the MENA region, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, areas that were not well covered through the initial BRICS membership. In effect, this means that the group will have even more arguments to project itself as a representative of the Global South, further reinforced in the case that even more developing countries join in the future.

Of course, in terms of reinforcing integration adding more members does not constitute the usual, optimum course. For spill-over effects to work, theory calls for enhanced relations within members of a group that have already established cooperation. But for the BRICS (not a traditional regional group) new members may have on economic terms similar positions with the inner circle (old members) - even more important ones if one focuses on the oil/energy sector (see for example the more than 160 billion dollars of trade relations of Saudi Arabia with the BRICS - Aljazeera, 2023b).

On the other hand, the expansion of membership of a group in which the few original members can be found in a deadlock due to competing interests could be a positive development. After all, there is main consensus on the need for a more equitable world order in which the Global South, or at least core representatives of it like the BRICS countries, has a better say and position. Moreover, it is certain that those members that are not strongly competing with the Global North (like Russia and China are) prone into maintaining a non-aligned stance that potentially provides them with benefits from both sides. Hence this new movement can be understood as a *partial and provisional bandwagoning*, through a vehicle that Günther Maihold of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs characterized as a negative coalition of states “*that cannot agree on a common position, but can create a consensus on what they oppose*”.

Interestingly the US has increased since September 2022 the frequency of statements related to the need for a reform of the UN Security Council or the importance of G20 as “*the premier forum for economic cooperation*” (DW, 2023). Biden titled this period as a time that is appropriate for making the UNSC *more inclusive*, a statement that was echoed in further statements by US officials on the modernization of global institutions such as the World Bank or even global responses to challenges such as the climate change or a new pandemic (Washington Post, 2023).

The fact that both the Russian and the Chinese presidents did not attend the recent G-20 Summit in India has given more ground on the US presenting itself as a promoter of international fora. Moreover, the 2023 G-20 declaration itself included statements intended to “*better integrate the perspectives of developing countries...into future G20 agenda and strengthen the voice of developing countries in global decision making*” and declared that the “*G20 is the premier forum for international economic cooperation*”. Moreover, it also included a sort of condemnation of Russian invasion while including the phrase of Modi when addressed to Vladimir Putin back in 2022 “*Today’s era must not be of war*” (G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration, 2023).

These developments, although difficult to translate into actual changes, are following comments by Ronaldo Costa Filho, Brazil’s outgoing ambassador to the United Nations, that reform of the Security Council is key for Global South finding value in the preservation of the current system. Moreover, the attention that the US wants to draw to the G-20 could be seen as an attempt to project this, more Western friendly, forum as the right place to have discussions on global governance. Interestingly, the fact that the next 2 presidencies of the G-20 fall in the hands of BRICS members (2024-Brazil, 2025-South Africa) following the 2023 Indian presidency will potentially provide some evidence on how the G-20 can function with an enhanced BRICS+ influence (through for example the agenda setting).

6. Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that the world has become during the last decades a more fragmented landscape with more frictions across most sectors. De-globalization and a partial retreat of the liberal world order, the one reinforcing continuously the other are becoming key elements of any analysis of the world politics and factors required to be taken into consideration for any forecasting activity.

The latter is partially the outcome of the rise of governments across the world, and especially in the US, that were putting, and to a substantial degree still do, emphasis on economic nationalism and strict national interests. A case of a missing hegemon that would, according to hegemonic stability theory, not provide public goods either because it does not want to or it because cannot any more. Though we have seen some repositioning of US stance over this issue under President Biden during the end of 2022 the world has been adapting to the above described reality.

As global issues that require global or at least regional responses are still present, and with their impacts reinforced by contemporary hyperconnectivity, regional integration schemes as well as specialized fora such as the BRICS could potentially act as alternatives to a not well functioning global governance system, or at least a system that does not include to a sufficient degree of the interests and positions of some states in the world, especially those from the Global South.

Recent developments in the SCO as well as the BRICS signal a potential change in how several developing states are reacting to the contemporary state of affairs. Even though both SCO and the BRICS are being led by the main US/Western order challengers, i.e. Russia and China, developing states, some being close allies to the West in the past, are joining them.

In effect, it is not yet certain whether their decisions are based on the premise of creating alternatives in a world that becomes more and more multipolar and thus becoming able to gain the most of out of all different (opposing) camps though staying more or less independent. After all, both SCO and the BRICS are highlighting in all occasions that they do not see themselves as anti-western coalitions. On the other hand, it is not also clear whether, pushed by the inconsistencies of the West in recent years, they are aiming at clearly bandwagoning for an era of enhanced friction that is coming – thus in reality already choosing sides.

What is though certain is that their inclusion in the SCO and the BRICS are creating more momentum for these groups, thus rendering them more interesting in the eyes of other developing states. In addition, based on the fact that both the SCO and the BRICS are not just expanding their membership but they are also pushing for enhanced trade and economic relations among their members, a spill-over effect may also be set in motion.

The next decade will provide some clarity on what the main scenarios could be but one thing is certain: if the current global governance structure is to be maintained, the Global North needs to urgently give practical signs (not just declarations) that it is being reformed to include more the voices and interests of

the Global South and therefore that there is value for the latter in preserving the current international institutions, formed in the 1940s.

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