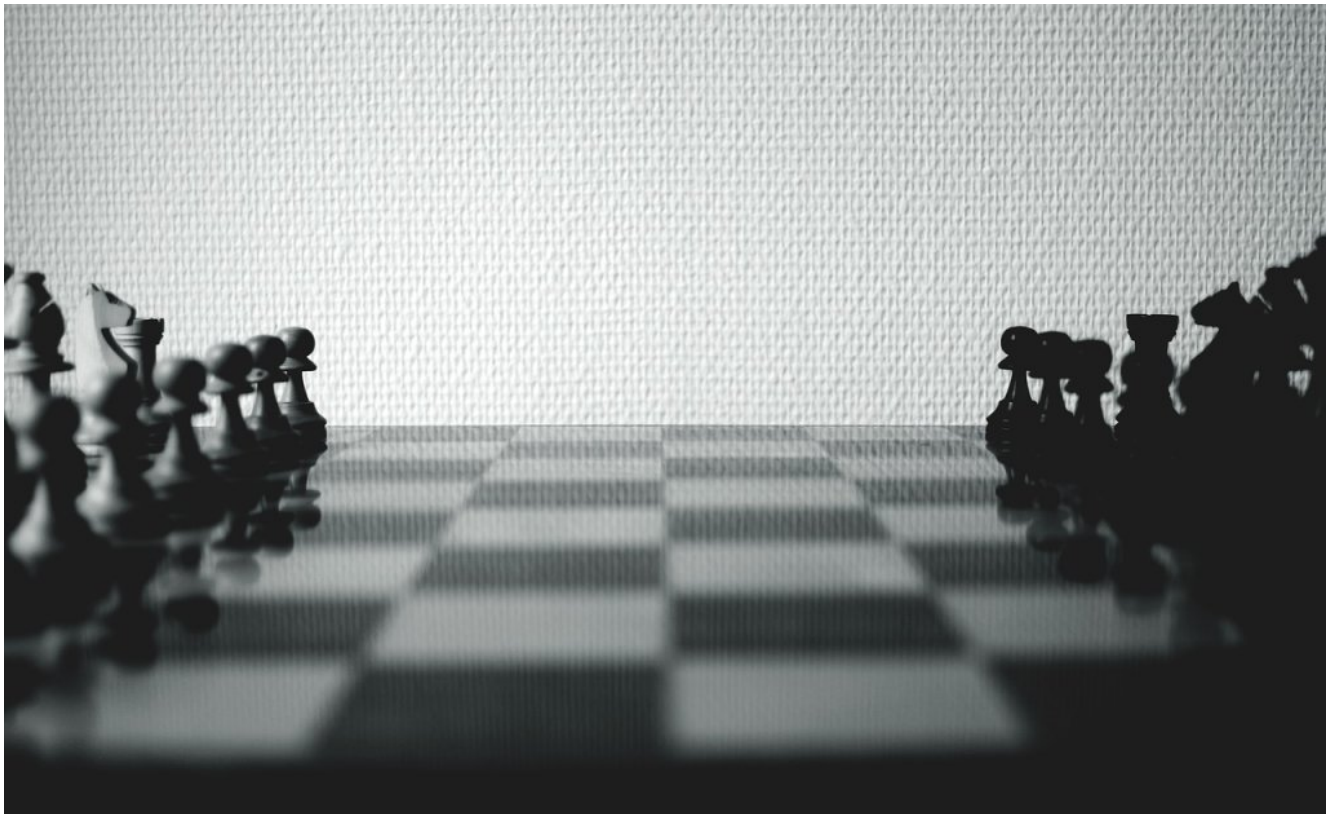


World Leaders Try Various Configurations of Summits in the Shadow of War - Pavel K. Baev



September has been a season of high-profile summits, and the outcome amounts to more than the usual diplomatic dances and photo-ops, preempting the UN General Assembly at the end of the month. From [Jakarta](#) to [Johannesburg](#) to [New Delhi](#), world leaders sought to find optimal configurations for joining their efforts toward solutions, or at least alleviations for the problems that seem to loom ever larger. One common theme in all these gatherings was enlargement. ASEAN tries to expand its reach by convening a series of extra summits, particularly with [China](#) and [USA](#); the BRICS opted for adding [six new states](#); and the G20 invited the [African Union](#) to join. Wider membership is essential to boost profile of organizations competing for influence, but it typically - as the example

of [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) shows and as the European Union knows all too well - dilutes cohesion and reduces ability for reaching meaningful consensus.

Another common theme was the clearly stated intention of the so-called “Global South” to increase its influence in global governance, which in one sense is entirely natural, and in another - a complete non-starter. Economically dynamic and populous states, like India, Indonesia, Brazil and Nigeria, are certainly entitled to make stronger contributions to resolving many global problems than they preferred in the four decades since the end of the Cold War. Every effort to forge a common front from these states, with their diverse interests and diverging priorities, is nevertheless, doomed to failure, so the term “[Global South](#)” is profoundly misleading.

In fact, it is China that is most interested in [propagating this perception](#), portraying itself as the leader of the “Global South”, to which is [clearly doesn't belong](#), so that the claim serves only as camouflage for the strategy of access to and exploitation of natural resources. Positioning themselves vis-à-vis assertive and ambitious China is a difficult issue for many Latin American, Asian and African states. In October 2023, their leaders will tread carefully at the [Belt and Road Forum](#) in Beijing. Economic slowdown is [increasingly assessed](#) not as a passing ripple in the decades-long trend of strong growth, but as a new norm, and many states that have grown dependent on the flow of trade with and investments from China have to re-evaluate the risks of these engagements. What is obvious for many stakeholders is that the Chinese leadership is not ready to acknowledge domestic causes of its economic ills. In this regard, Chinese leadership seeks to blame the West for the exhaustion of the habitual dynamism.

This evolving confrontation makes the task of positioning vis-à-vis the newly-reunited West equally difficult for the traditionally non-allied states, like India, as well as pro-US countries, like Saudi Arabia or Mexico. It is clear from them that the main driving forces that consolidates Western unity and re-energizes the US leadership is the Ukraine war, and while the was majority of UN member-states have repeatedly condemned Russian aggression in voting for General Assembly

resolutions, they also prefer to keep safe distance from this calamity. Russia is not particularly upset with the diplomatic disapproval and seeks to gain maximum possible dividend from the various [combinations of distancing and profiteering](#) from the distortions caused by its war.

Moscow has promoted the idea of “[multipolar world](#)” for many years, but it still cannot qualify as a concept because neither the composition of “poles” nor means of managing competitive relations with them is elaborated, so that the only purpose of the argument is to declare that Russia is indeed one of the “centers of power”. In the last couple of years, this idea has been enriched with harsh criticism of Western “[neo-colonialism](#)”, while Russia’s own colonial past and, indeed [present](#), is resolutely bracketed out. Despite its apparent shallowness, this rhetoric generates resonance among many populists in Latin America and Africa, not least because China eagerly contributes its share of “anti-colonial” discourse, as the recent [G77 summit in Havana](#) has witnessed yet again.

The main priority in Russia’s application of its “multipolar” proposition has shifted notably from the Middle East to Africa, and the loudly trumpeted Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg in Mid-July, into which President Putin invested an exorbitant personal effort, was supposed to mark the culmination of these intrigues. Instead, the pompous gathering [revealed the limits](#) of Russia’s outreach and its inability to optimize the use of available policy instruments. Energy export is one of these instruments, but by making [deals with Saudi Arabia](#) on cuts in oil production, Moscow is pushing prices up – contrary to the interests of many importers, as well as China. [Food security](#) is another useful instrument, but instead of showing flexibility and reassuring many African states, Putin remains [adamant against](#) reviving the “grain deal”, so that Ukraine is compelled to use high-risk maritime routes.

One particularly impactful instrument for Russia’s policy in Africa is the use of mercenaries, and the [chain of military coups](#) in the Sahel region grants Moscow opportunities for exploiting the turmoil for spreading its influence. Instead, the [breakdown of the Wagner Group](#) after the demise of its maverick boss Yevgeny Prigozhin leaves Russian military intelligence with too many

commitments and too little resources, while the convenient deniability is gone.

What Moscow fails to understand is that its [“anti-colonial” discourse](#) cannot possibly produce a wide and solid anti-Western platform because most states in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East that it counts as potential partners are interested in building stronger ties with the West. They resent the diminished Western attention to their problems and assume correctly that the allocation of vast resources toward supporting Ukraine inevitably reduces the pool of aid available for addressing economic crises and humanitarian disasters in the poorest countries. The solution cannot be found, however, in amplifying the demands for more attention, which are certain to be voiced at the UN General Assembly. The only way to reset priorities is to ensure victory to Ukraine by cutting the long war short, and no amount of Russian propaganda can alter this prospect.



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