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Russia and Global South: Trusted ally or strategic opportunist? Q&A with Prof Vladimir Golstein

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Vladimir Golstein

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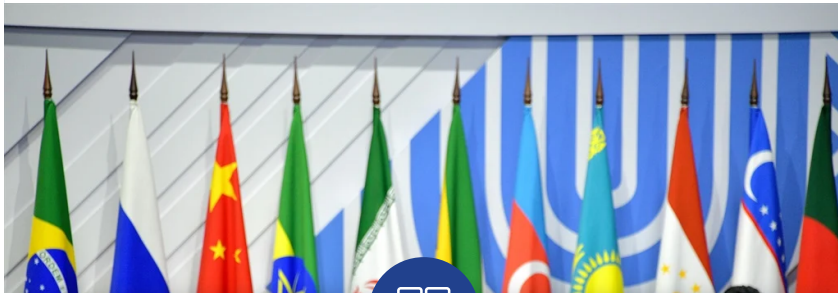
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What unites the countries of 'the Global South' is the desire to be treated by the West as equal partners rather than the objects of plunder, argues the interviewee. (Elmond Jiyane/GCIS/Supplied).

Dr Jelena Vidojevic and **Prof Radmila Nakarada** from the New South Institute recently spoke to Brown University's **Prof Vladimir Golstein**, who is

the author of "Lermontov's Narratives of Heroism" and "Svetlana Alexievich - The Voice of Soviet Intelligentsia" to explore the complexities and potential of BRICS and Russia's evolving role in global geopolitics and the efforts to counterbalance Western dominance.

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Does Russia in relation to the Global South (understood in a more traditional way) seek the position of a trusted ally (having in mind the historical role of the Soviet Union in supporting the anti-colonial struggle and liberation movements across Africa and Asia), or does it consider itself one of the leading members and voices of the Global South? One may claim that BRICS (with Russia as its key member) is more powerful than any former "South", but at the same time, is it considerably less "Southern"?

VG: Russia found itself at a loss with the collapse of the Soviet Union. While inheriting certain features, attitudes, and alliances formed by centuries of Russian and Soviet empires, the new Russian Federation was forced to reconsider, if not reinvent, several previous certainties, be it in economic,

political, or cultural spheres. Furthermore, it had to confront a new geopolitical reality consisting of practically absolute American hegemony.

Furthermore, the country was forced to realise that any further weakening of its geopolitical standing would result in the country's dismantling (the way the Soviet Union has been dismantled).

As it started from this weak position, the country had to think quickly and become much more pragmatic in its behaviour. While recognising certain obligations connected with its past, it had to move beyond all sorts of traditional liabilities connected with these obligations. (The case of Cuba is rather telling.)

Russia, therefore, is hardly in the position to act like a "trusted ally" of all sorts of liberation movements. What it aspires to do is to have temporary allies in its struggle against American domination. It also prefers to act like an arbiter rather than a leader of one or other side. It aspires to be pragmatic and even-handed; to sell, buy, interact and form important allegiances that contribute to accomplishing this goal.

In terms of the Global South - what unites the countries that constitute it, including Russia, is the desire to be treated by the West as equal partners rather than the objects of plunder. That's the driving force behind the countries that constitute the Global South, and that understand that one way of resisting Western dominance is through independent economic development and cooperation.

What is Russia saying by translating the Global South into "Global Majority"? And is the Global Majority an attempt to respond to the "Collective West"? What is Russia's design for the international order?

VG: Both Russia and China are extremely wary of the United States and the Collective West dominance. Both countries insist on striving towards a multipolar world, an international order modelled on the Peace of Westphalia, where entities recognise the uniqueness of each party and are willing to interact based on pragmatism and cooperation rather than bringing democracy (used to be civilisation and religion) on its bayonets.

Of course, the US, which continues to benefit from its hegemonic position, is not willing to change and modify its ways. While military confrontation is one way of introducing the change, BRICS countries are clearly trying to introduce the change through economics.

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Critics often suggest that from the very beginning, there is a degree of "artificiality" in the BRICS alliance, insisting on the supposed "lack of identity" among these countries. Thus it will be unfeasible for BRICS to form a stable economic bloc. What are your thoughts on this?

VG: It won't be easy, for sure. But, artificial or not, BRICS countries have clear goals in front of them,

and are interested in achieving them. Needless to say, there are obstacles on the way. One such obstacle is the economic dominance of the Collective West, which has to be recognised.

Since the West is not interested in giving in its dominance, it will do its best to put pressure whenever and wherever it can. Another obstacle is the economic power of China. One obviously does not want to see the replay of the NATO vs Warsaw Block confrontation, with China using BRICS countries in its confrontation with the Collective West.

In spite of the declared common interest of transcending/limiting the global domination of the West, to what extent is the Global South a space of rivalry for China, India and Russia?

VG: What unites these three countries is the experience of Western abuse and exploitation, coupled with the shared goal of resisting Western dominance. One hopes that these centripetal forces are stronger than the centrifugal forces created by:

- **some old political, territorial or economic rivalries; and**
- **the temptation of forming a special relationship with the Collective West at the expense of their allegiance to BRICS partners.**

What gives me hope is the belief that each of these countries - China, India and Russia - share very important, if not fundamental, experience of being mistreated by the Collective West, and its cynical and duplicitous ways modelled on the Roman

principle of "divide and conquer".

While the economic or political aspirations of these countries might be different, their strength lies in unity rather than in myopic economic advantages. So while rivalries between these powerful and proud countries are inevitable, their leadership should have enough common sense not to let these rivalries be exploited by their extremely sophisticated and experienced opponent, the Collective West.

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To what extent are newly created institutions and initiatives of the Global South, BRICS being the most prominent one, offering an alternative (fundamentally redefined institutions and policies) to neoliberal capitalism? What are the main challenges they are facing in rethinking, reshaping and rebalancing the world order?

VG: In my view, BRICS is a wonderful initiative, which can serve as a model for other forms of cooperation. Of course, the world being as it is, there are plenty of obstacles in the way, ranging from military, political and intellectual pressure to the old economic links and dependencies.

The Collective West and its neoliberal capitalism still possess both carrot and stick to drive the wedge between the BRICS countries. It is clear that BRICS countries will be forced to learn new ways of thinking and interacting. There will be tensions, anxieties and suspicions along the way. But the

future of a multipolar world, where every country has a secure place under the sun and interacts with other countries on the basis of mutual respect and solidarity, is a worthy goal to strive for.

Confronting the temporal uncertainty, mistakes or pressures for the sake of achieving a more balanced and harmonious world is something that such old and self-respecting civilisations like India, China or Russia should be willing to choose.

How does Russia respond to the criticism that the BRICS is a gathering/configuration seeking to improve the position of national elites within the global structures of power and not generating structural social transformation?

VG: Needless to say, it is national elites that stand at the helm of all sorts of movements. Their original impulse can be selfish and self-serving. One can add to that a very successful propaganda campaign, conducted by the Collective West, that targets national elites and strives to remodel them into serving a Western globalist agenda.

Yet, we remember that it was people like Gandhi who, having studied in the West and learnt its methods, had found a way of resisting it. The same applies to various Russian or Chinese revolutionaries.

Consequently, it is up to the national elites to learn from the past, overcome their myopic and self-destructive selfishness, and create a unified front to resist Western domination.

If the educated and intelligent elite can't do it, nobody can. The burden is on them, Russian elites in particular, who, due to Russia's historical and cultural development, tend to underestimate national strength and uniqueness and overestimate the benevolence and rationality of the West.

One hopes that memories of both world wars, as well as the current confrontation with the Collective West, are sufficient to keep Russian elites even-handed and independent.

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