

## Policy Brief

# The Rising Strategic Significance of the Atlantic Basin

## The Atlantic Basin, Realism and Geostrategy (I): The Strategic Significance of Pan-Atlanticism for the West.

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*“According to realism, states exist within an anarchic international system in which they are ultimately dependent on their own capabilities, or power, to further their national interests. The most important national interest is the survival of the state, including its people, political system, and territorial integrity. Other major interests for realists include the preservation of a nation’s culture and economy. Realists contend that, as long as the world is divided into nation-states in an anarchic setting, national interest will remain the essence of international politics.”*

Duncan Bell, 2023<sup>1</sup>

*“[G]eostrategy is about the exercise of power over particularly critical spaces on the Earth’s surface; about crafting a political presence over the international system. It is aimed at enhancing one’s security and prosperity; about making the international system more prosperous; about shaping rather than being shaped.”*

James Rogers and Luis Simón, 2010<sup>2</sup>

*“In recent years the ‘Atlantic Basin’ approach has enjoyed a renaissance, but the context for the intellectual debate and the policy implications have evolved substantially. Under current conditions, the logic of rethinking Atlantic geopolitics is no less compelling in a far more challenging strategic environment.”*

I.O. Lesser, 2022<sup>3</sup>

1. “Realism: International Relations,” Britannica, 2023. Last updated on September 5, 2023 (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/realism-political-and-social-science/Neorealism-in-international-relations>).

2. James Rogers and Luis Simón, “Think Again: European Geostrategy,” Ideas on Europe, 2010 (<http://europeangeostrategy.ideason europe.eu/2010/03/14/think-again-european-geostrategy/>).

3. Ian O. Lesser, “Southern Atlanticism Revisited: What Scope for North-South Consensus?” *Atlantic Currents* 2022, Policy Center for the New South, December 2022, p. 23.

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Over the past 20 years, the pan-Atlantic focus has gained salience from a ‘realist’ perspective, particularly in terms of global geopolitics and geoeconomics. The emergence of China and India in Eurasia, along with the coalescing of the Global South, have generated an accelerating shift in the international balance of power. This shift, and what it could imply for the West, has finally focused some attention in the Northern Atlantic on finding new ways of collaborating with current and potential partners in the Southern Atlantic (i.e. Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean). The two Joint Statements on pan-Atlantic cooperation, led respectively by Portugal and the U.S., along with the recently launched Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, are evidence of this (see Policy Brief One).

Such a geostrategic imperative becomes even more visible in light of the Ukraine war and its geoeconomic and geopolitical fallout. The global shockwaves stemming from Russia’s incursion into Ukraine are recasting the previous unipolar structure into one of increasing multipolarity. A major catalyst of the accelerated shift in the balance of power has been the cumulative package of Western sanctions against Russia. Although over 25% of the world’s population already lives under sanctions<sup>4</sup>, never before has a package of sanctions with such a comprehensive scope (i.e. how much of the target’s economy is covered) and such a wide *intended* reach (i.e. the extent of support sought or expected from third parties to join sanctions on the target) been imposed as a punitive and coercive measure on such a large target country (i.e. one with the geoeconomic weight and geopolitical centrality of Russia). Yet, more than the negative economic ripple effect of the sanctions on the poorer economies of the Global South, already reeling from the effects of the pandemic and the ‘vaccine geopolitics’ it produced, it has been Western diplomatic pressure on the emerging powers to also impose sanctions (along with the implicit geoeconomic threat of ‘secondary sanctions’ if they declined) that has caused the Global South to balk.

One of the most important global impacts of the war, therefore, has been the stimulus it has provided for further development and expansion of the BRICS. This international organization incorporates the major Eurasian powers, including Russia, India, and China (the RICs), Brazil and South Africa—both leading countries from the Global South, and both Southern Atlantic countries with an important stake in the Atlantic Basin.

For the first time in at least half a century, a significant group of like-minded countries with increasingly shared or compatible national and global interests—which they no longer perceive as identical with those of the West—and with distinct national and cultural values<sup>5</sup>—which they no longer see as ‘universal,’ as understood by the proponents of the ‘liberal international order’—has the potential to take shape across Eurasia and the Global South. Even if this bloc is still limited and only loosely associated -- even if it remains vulnerable to the carrot-and-stick geostrategy of the West -- it potentially covers the majority of the world’s population, resources, and economic output. This emerging multi-regional association is also gaining momentum. At the most recent BRICS XV Summit on August 23-24, 2023, in Johannesburg, six additional countries—Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates—were invited to become formal members on January 1, 2024.

The shift away from unipolarity and U.S. hegemony is not only occurring on the geoeconomic plane of the geostrategic map—where an expanding economic multipolarity has been evident for at least a decade—but also on the geopolitical plane. While the Northern Atlantic, led by

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4. Alan Macleod, “With a quarter of the world’s population under US sanctions, countries appeal to UN to intervene,” Mint Press News, March 27, 2020 (<https://www.mintpressnews.com/coronavirus-quarter-worlds-population-under-us-sanctions-appeal-to-un/266096/>)

5. See Len Ishmael, “A World Divided: A Multilayered, Multipolar World,” in Len Ishmael, ed., *Aftermath of War in Europe: The West vs. The Global South?* Policy Center for the New South, December 2022, pp. 17-41.

the U.S., remains militarily hegemonic on the level of ‘hard power,’ the broad Coalition of ‘the Rest’ is beginning to challenge the Northern Atlantic’s unipolarity on the diplomatic and intelligence levels of the geopolitical plane of international power<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, on the geoeconomic plane, U.S. hegemony is being eroded at the level of access to, and influence over, markets and resources (physical and technological). The U.S. maintains full hegemonic *geoeconomic unipolarity* only at the level of monetary power. The implication of this multi-level deterioration of strategic unipolarity is the expectation of intensified geostrategic competition. The full formation of multipolarity or a new form of bipolarity are now visible as distinct possibilities.

**Table 1:**

### Current Structure of International Power, 2023

Geostrategic Planes of Power				
Levels of Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Power				
Geopolitical	Military	Intelligence	Diplomatic	
<i>Eroding unipolar hegemony (U.S.)</i>	<i>Unipolar hegemony (U.S.)</i>	<i>Emerging multipolarity</i>	<i>Emerging multipolarity</i>	
Geoeconomic				
	Markets (access to/ influence over)	Resources and technology	Monetary power	International Rules
<i>Multipolarity</i>	<i>Multipolarity</i>	<i>Multipolarity</i>	<i>Unipolar hegemony (U.S.)</i>	<i>Emerging Multipolarity</i>

Source: Based on Baracuh, 2019 (see Footnote 6) and own analysis and elaboration.

Continued multipolar restructuring of the international balance of power, coupled with intensified geostrategic competition, would make the restoration of complete U.S. unipolar hegemony (both geopolitical and geoeconomic)<sup>7</sup> an even greater challenge for the U.S. and its Western allies than it has already proven to be since the ‘unipolar moment’ came to an end. There is much discussion and debate about when exactly this occurred, but it was at some point between:

- The culmination of the ‘emerging market crises’ in Argentina in 2002;
- The US invasion of Iraq in 2003;
- The deadlock at the Doha Round of WTO multilateral trade negotiations;
- The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 onward;
- The unilateral and destabilizing U.S. geoeconomic aggression under the Trump Administration;
- The pandemic;

6. Brazilian diplomat and strategic analyst, Braz Baracuh, has suggested a division of the international structure and distribution of power into a geopolitical plane and a geoeconomic plane of strategic competition and cooperation, each with their own sub-levels of operational capabilities and domains. Geopolitical domains include diplomacy, intelligence capabilities, and military power; geoeconomic powers include influence over markets, resources, and international rules. Braz Baracuh, “Geo-economics as a dimension of grand strategy: notes on the concept and its evolution,” Chapter 2, in Mikael Wigell, Sören Scholvin and Mika Aaltola, eds., *Geo-Economics and Power Politics in the 21st Century: The Return of Economic Statecraft*, Routledge: London and New York, 2019. (pp. 14-27).

7. Also known as ‘full spectrum dominance’ in U.S. national security strategy documents.

- The final U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan;
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Without pin-pointing the date, in a major foreign policy address at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced and International Studies (SAIS), days before he announced the Declaration on Atlantic Cooperation, U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, confirmed that the end has already come and gone: “...what we’re experiencing now, is more than a test of the post-Cold War order. It’s the end of it”<sup>8</sup>.

Amid the emerging multipolarity, a ‘Western coalition’ has coalesced around the traditional ‘transatlantic relationship’ between North America and Europe (embodied in NATO), together with their strategic allies in East and Southeastern Asia—what is often referred to as the ‘collective West’<sup>9</sup>. This Northern Atlantic *Plus* version of ‘the West’, called the ‘unipolar alliance’ by some<sup>10</sup>, faces an implicit if still nascent geostrategic challenge from a broadening and coalescing association between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of Eurasia and the reinvigorated BRICS.

This ‘Coalition of the Rest’—or the ‘multipolar alliance’—encompasses the ‘great powers’ and other ‘multipoles’ of Eurasia in an incipient coalition with the leading emerging powers of the Global South. Furthermore, the common overlapping membership of the SCO and BRICS is growing. Applications for membership of both groups have begun to proliferate from a range of countries of the former ‘second’ and ‘third’ worlds<sup>11</sup>. A group of countries in Southwest Asia (Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates among them) aspire to enter both of these strategic groupings. At the last SCO summit in Tashkent, Iran was invited to join. The SCO now has nine full members, three observer states (which are in line for membership), and nine ‘dialogue partners’ (which are in line for observer status and full membership), including Türkiye, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. As noted above, new members were invited to join at the recent BRICS summit, and scores of other countries have expressed interest<sup>12</sup>.

When we turn to look at the strategic view of the Atlantic Basin from the vantage of Eurasia, we see more clearly how such a developing overlap in SCO-BRICS membership—in this case, in the broad Middle East, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean region—could provide a critical anchor for a geostrategic association capable of constraining the Western coalition diplomatically and geoeconomically. This would be the case particularly if it also could count on the geostrategic collaboration of the Southern Atlantic. In any case, this Eurasian overlap of the BRICS with the SCO is a notable example of what Len Ishmael, veteran diplomat of the Global South and Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, has termed “*multilayered multipolarity*”<sup>13</sup>. Not only does such a systemic geostrategic topography suggest the possibility of at least implicit cooperation, if not explicit alliance, among those of the Coalition of the Rest, it also strengthens the strategic hedging capacities of countries occupying multiple layers of this emerging multilayered multipolarity.

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8. Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) “The Power and Purpose of American Diplomacy” September 13, 2023 (<https://bg.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinkens-speech-on-the-power-and-purpose-of-american-diplomacy-in-a-new-era-09-14-2023/>).

9. The term, the ‘collective West,’ is used interchangeably with the ‘Northern Atlantic Plus’ (i.e. the Northern Atlantic—North America and Europe—together with their allies in East and South East Asia).

10. See for example, David Woo, “Global North and Global South at War?” David Woo Unbound, May 1, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFq4QbOUkMo>

11. John P. Ruehl, “Iranian, Turkish moves to join SCO raise its profile,” Asia Times, October 8, 2022 (<https://asiatimes.com/2022/10/iranian-turkish-moves-to-join-sco-raise-its-profile/>).

12. “19 countries express interest in joining BRICS group,” Times of India, April 25, 2023 (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/19-countries-express-interest-in-joining-brics-group/articleshow/99756285.cms?from=mdr>)

13. Len Ishmael, op. cit. p. 17.

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But there is the possibility that this emerging multipolarity will be eclipsed by the potential for China alone to dominate among the multipoles, with or without that strategic intent, and to pose a challenge by itself to the current hegemon. Such a challenge from China would create the possibility of a new bipolar structure. This outcome would be more likely if the nascent coalition of the Rest remains fragmented and therefore strategically weak, and if the potential of BRICS Plus fails to materialize. In this case, individual states across the coalition of the Rest would presumably drift into the sphere of influence of either the U.S. or China.

This is the 'new Cold War' that many in the West see taking shape. However, such a new U.S.-China bipolarity would not be the 'classical bipolarity' of the original Cold War between the first world (of the U.S. and the West) and the second world (of the USSR and the other communist states in the COMECON, generally referred to as the East). Cold War bipolarity turned out to be relatively stable in a geostrategic sense—even if the world lived under a nuclear balance of terror while war was displaced to the third world. For both superpowers had emerged from the Second World War at the peak of their hitherto powers. Enjoying absolute hegemony within their respective blocs, the U.S. and USSR locked into a more-or-less balanced competition between geopolitical equals for the strategic loyalty of the third world (of developing countries and some remaining European colonies), often through the execution of proxy wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

If the current structure of international power does evolve into a U.S.-China bipolarity, it would be a 'neo-bipolarity' defined by a broad conception of the "Thucydides Trap", a term first coined by Graham T. Allison in 2012 when contemplating the U.S.-China relations.<sup>14</sup> Allison referred to a line from the fifth century BCE Athenian historian and general Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*—"it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable"<sup>15</sup>—to frame his central claim that there is a tendency towards war whenever a rising power challenges the status of a reigning hegemon, as in the case of emerging China and the U.S. at the height of its unipolar moment.<sup>16</sup> Although there is a large body of historical and geopolitical criticism of Allison's thesis, if one strips out critiques revolving around conflicting interpretations of strategic intent on the part of one power or the other, and subjective evaluations of the accuracy of either state's perceptions of their own war capacities or realistic chances for victory, it is possible to identify a common denominator in the equation suggesting that whenever a unipolar hegemon encounters an emerging power that could become a potential rival, the world experiences a heightened vulnerability to war.

This kind of emerging bipolarity would likely be less stable than the original Cold War because in this 'neo-Cold War', rather than *containing* communism and the Soviet Union, the U.S. is attempting to restore and maintain full-spectrum dominance and unipolar strategic hegemony, both geopolitical and geoeconomic, over a large emerging power—one that is assumed in the West to aspire to hegemony. Such strategic objectives require the containment of emerging China through geoeconomic policy; also, if necessary, by military means. This would condemn both sides to the "tragedy of great power politics"—as John Mearsheimer has recast the Thucydides Trap in a 'neorealist' vein-- in which even great powers seeking security will nevertheless find themselves forced to engage in strategic competition and even to go to war with each other.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, instead of evolving directly into the 'neo-bipolarity' of the Thucydides Trap or the

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14. Graham T. Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>)

15. Thucydides, "The History of the Peloponnesian War" (431-411 BCE) The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (<http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.1.first.html>)

16. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017

17. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated Edition), Amazon.com, April 7, 2014, ISBN 978-0393349276

tragedy of great power politics, the emerging multipolarity could be deflected into a regionalized *West versus East-South bipolarity*, or a what could be called a ‘lopsided bipolarity.’ This would involve the currently nascent Coalition of the Rest, led in part by the original BRICS (with a relative but not absolute leadership role for China) allied, at least loosely, in a diplomatic constraint on the West. Each of these West and East-South groupings could be held together by tighter or looser geopolitical and geoeconomic collaboration within their respective spheres, in a way that gradually structures ‘multipolarity’ into ‘lopsided bipolarity’ in which one of the strongest ‘multi-poles’ faces a far greater array of ‘allied multi-poles’ whose collective association is greater in demographic, economic and geographic terms. Such a ‘lopsided bipolarity’ would assume a growing and increasingly effective collaboration and cooperation among states and peoples of the Coalition of the Rest, embodied in an expanding and deepening BRICS Plus, the maximum expression of which would be an international organization that included all of Eurasia plus the Southern Atlantic.

Finally, it is also possible that a ‘neoclassical bipolarity’—superficially reminiscent of Cold War ‘classical bipolarity’ and characterized by a broader and more balanced East-West competition--could also take shape. This outcome would be possible *if the Southern Atlantic were to integrate fully with the Atlantic Basin through pan-Atlantic cooperation and participate in the establishment of a formal Atlantic Basin regional organization, and Atlantic Basic Community.*

The development of a new Atlantic Basin regional system would assume: (1) the Southern Atlantic states, on balance, realign more closely with the Northern Atlantic than with the Eurasian powers (implying either the eschewing, or the failure, of strategic hedging); and (2) that a partial economic fragmentation (in terms of trade and financial flows, supply chains, and regional governance) between the Atlantic Basin and Eurasia will continue to develop. The relative retreat and fragmentation of globalization had already begun as a result of the geopolitics of the pandemic, but it has accelerated in the wake of the ongoing Ukraine War, Western sanctions against Russia, and the re-shoring and friend-shoring of Northern Atlantic economic production in their wake.

**Table 2:**

### Evolution of the Structure of International Power, Past and Future

Structure	State(s)	Characteristics	Balance of Power	Scenario	Period
Unipolarity	United Kingdom	Geoeconomic and geopolitical hegemony	Stable	Pax Britannica	19 <sup>th</sup> century
Multipolarity	UK-German-U.S.-Japan-USSR	Geoeconomic and geopolitical multipolarity	Unstable	WWI-Interwar Years-WWII	1 <sup>st</sup> half 20 <sup>th</sup> century
Bipolarity	U.S.-USSR	Classical	Stable	Cold War	1946-1989
Unipolarity	U.S.	Geoeconomic and geopolitical hegemony	Stable	Liberal international order	1990s
Multipolarity Phase 1	U.S.-EU-China-Russia-India-Brazil	Emerging geoeconomic multipolarity	Relatively Unstable	Global governance gridlock	2000s

<b>Phase 2</b>	Major and emerging powers	Multilayered multipolarity; full geoeconomic multipolarity	Relatively Unstable	Global governance fragmentation	2010s
<b>Phase 3</b>	U.S.-Europe-Eurasia-Global South	Incipient geopolitical multipolarity	Unstable	BRICS Plus	2023
<b>Bipolarity</b>					
<b>Scenario 1</b>	US-China	'neo-bipolar' Thucydides Trap	Unstable	'Restoration'	2020s-2030s
<b>Scenario 2</b>	Northern Atlantic vs BRICS Plus	'Lopsided bipolarity'	Stable	'Reform'	2020s-2030s
<b>Scenario 3</b>	Atlantic Basin vs Eurasia	'neoclassical bipolarity'	Unstable More balanced, stable BoP	'Revolution' 'Regionalization of globalization'	2020s-2030s

Source: Kortunov, 2023 (see Footnote 18) and own analysis and elaboration.

The Northern Atlantic Plus still sees a victory in Ukraine over Russia as a possible outcome to the unstable and shifting *status quo* of growing geoeconomic rivalry with a large part of Eurasia. The ultimate defeat of Russia in Ukraine could help the U.S. halt the erosion to its unipolar hegemony and allow the Northern Atlantic Plus to attempt a restoration and stabilization of the liberal international order under the auspices of the UN-Bretton Woods.

The notion of a restoration of unipolarity is taken seriously, at least as an analytical possibility, even by some top analysts in the extra-Atlantic world of the Rest. For example, Andrey Kortunov, director-general of the Russian International Affairs Council, sees three possible outcomes of the current unstable *status quo* of proxy war and geoeconomic conflict: (1) a 'restoration' of unipolarity; (2) 'reformation' of the current UN-Bretton Woods global governance system within the context of a new multipolarity, characterized by a gradually expanding BRICS; or (3) perhaps a systemic change ('revolution') in which the emerging BRICS-sphere (increasingly cohesive in terms of both political and economic policy objectives) attempts to erect a new or alternative global governance system (including systemic change to the global rules of trade and finance), with or without the acquiescence and full participation of the Northern Atlantic Plus<sup>18</sup>.

Against a backdrop of many independent variables that would affect the shape of any coming order—including the particular evolution of globalization, the development of AI, climate change, and migration—Kortunov believes restoration is possible, but ultimately not sustainable beyond the short run. On the other hand, he sees the 'revolution' scenario as too risky and costly for all parties. In this scenario, the West resists negotiating an effective reform to the UN-Bretton Woods

18. Andrey Kortunov, Address to the Monterrey Summer Symposium on Russia, July 2-18, 2023, Monterrey Initiative in Russian Studies and Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterrey (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7iyqH8RYBw>).

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system, and the broad BRICS-sphere attempts to impose a new order onto emerging 'multilayered multipolarity.' This scenario risks provoking the U.S. into responses that lead it into the Thucydides Trap, or into the tragedy of great power politics.

But a defeat for the West in Ukraine, or even a stalemate, could push multipolarity precisely in the direction of an increasingly cohesive BRICS Plus with a large majority of the world's population, resources, and economic output. Under such an eventual outcome, either the 'reformation' or the 'revolution' scenarios could unfold. In the 'revolution' scenario, however, attempts between East and West at a geopolitical agreement at the UN level fail, leading in one of two possible directions: (1) continued erosion of global governance, an atomization of global politics, intensified arms races, and heightened risk of more military conflict; or, if war can be avoided, (2) a 'regionalization' of globalization and governance dynamics. If this latter 'regionalization' scenario of Kortunov's were to unfold, the geostrategic terrain would be ripe for pan-Atlantic cooperation and possible Atlantic Basin regionalism.

More than ever, in the 'post-Post-Cold War' dispensation, the Coalition of the Rest, via the widening BRICS-sphere, has the potential to place the Northern Atlantic states increasingly into a *de-facto* diplomatic isolation, at least on the major issues of war and peace and bread, and their international governance, both in international forums and within the broader international system of power.

Realists would tell us that the mere creep forward of a such a potential threat—even one that still might not be widely considered as likely, or even as credible by many—often provokes the threatened state(s) to react aggressively in a tactically offensive, strategically defensive manner. And many realists might add: *"Look at what has just happened between NATO and Russia in Ukraine."* Others might prefer to refer to the Thucydides Trap that awaits a state that attempts to impose 'restoration' in the face of lost or eroding hegemony, or to the tragedy of great power politics that, sadly, might await any state that achieves a certain level of relative power.

## The Strategic Significance of the Atlantic Basin and pan-Atlanticism for the West

From a realist perspective, it should come as no surprise that the U.S. and many of its Northern Atlantic partners began to engage Southern Atlantic states in a new initiative of pan-Atlantic cooperation in 2022, the first year of the Ukraine war. This has consolidated into the 32-state strong Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, in the wake of the August 2023 XV BRICS Summit, at which this organization agreed on membership expansion and commissioned a working group to report back on options for alternative currency and payments arrangements for the group to consider at the next BRICS summit. The appearance of the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation at this particular historical juncture is an indicator that the Atlantic Basin regional focus is also rising in value as a strategic asset, as a diplomatic tool, and as an important aspirational horizon for states and peoples of the Atlantic Basin.

There is a deep-seated realist interest among the countries of the Western coalition, particularly in this historical moment, in attracting the states and peoples of the Southern Atlantic into the wider Atlantic world, and nudging them away from deeper institutional partnership with the coalition of the Rest, in which the Eurasian powers are likely to wield the most *apparent* influence. From the realist perspective, it makes obvious strategic sense for Northern Atlantic countries to engage the Southern Atlantic countries (many of which are potential members of an expanded BRICS Plus) in new initiatives of 'pan-Atlantic cooperation.' At the very least, the countries of the unipolar alliance



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have a strategic interest in balancing the effects of deeper Southern Atlantic collaboration, even integration, with the coalition of the Rest<sup>19</sup>.

The Atlantic Basin framework is essential in this context: the Southern Atlantic states are the crucial partners in any Western attempt to shore up its diplomatic and intelligence positions on the geopolitical plane of eroding U.S. unipolar hegemony, let alone to revive the 'liberal international order' (what could be called the 'unipolar restoration scenario'), or even to recast it within the more limited, but still wide, pan-Atlantic regional frame. Even such a successful reformulation of the liberal rules-based order within the Atlantic Basin (as a second-best scenario short of unipolar restoration) would need to be a significantly reformed version of the current global governance system, one more representative of and attractive to the Global South. *"If the United States and Europe fail to engage the south in Atlantic terms,"* wrote Ian Lesser back in 2010, *"there is a very real risk that key partners will opt for alternative identities. These are likely to be framed in terms of the global south, or purely national perspectives. Neither posture is likely to promote closer cooperation with Washington or Brussels on common challenges. The result would be a fragmented Atlantic space in which critical opportunities for collaboration will be lost"*<sup>20</sup>.

Opportunities today for the West to reset North-South Atlantic relations to deepen pan-Atlantic cooperation still abound, but so do the challenges. A major hurdle would be the long-standing suspicion in the Southern Atlantic that NATO might one day attempt to expand southwards<sup>21</sup>. The expansion of NATO eastward and the war in Ukraine, along with its economic and geopolitical repercussions, including the sanctions war and the stimulus it has provided to BRICS Plus, have only further invigorated stances of sovereignty, particularly military sovereignty, in the Southern Atlantic. There are also lingering perceptions of neo-colonialism, Northern Atlantic bias, and Western hypocrisy in the governance of Western-dominated Bretton Woods institutions, which constitute the architectural infrastructure of the liberal international order. Moreover, UN-Bretton Woods-based global governance is stalled in gridlock; for over two decades, reforms to the Security Council, the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank have been under discussion with essentially no progress<sup>22</sup>. Meanwhile, the developing world, particularly Africa, now has higher debt levels than at any time since the Third World Debt Crisis of the 1980s-1990s<sup>23</sup>. And while the servicing of such debt in many countries now costs more than their spending on health and education<sup>24</sup>, it is still less than the international climate finance that has been pledged to the developing world—a commitment that has yet to be completely fulfilled.

For the first time in decades, the leaders of Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean are beginning to speak out in clear terms, dressing down Western leaders when they belatedly come

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19. The term, 'coalition of the Rest,' is meant to be synonymous with the rest of the world beyond the Northern Atlantic Plus (or the broader West), including most of Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America (also interchangeable with the 'BRICS-sphere').

20. I.O. Lesser, 'Southern Atlanticism: Geopolitics and Strategy for the Other Half of the Atlantic Rim', The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, 2010, p. 21.

21. *"Just as NATO continues to face substantial public diplomacy challenges in its outreach to the Arab and Muslim worlds, alliance efforts in many parts of the Atlantic south would face substantial ideological resistance among publics and some elites."* Ian O. Lesser, op. cit., p. 5.

22. Stewart Patrick, "Rules of Order: Assessing the State of Global Governance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper, September 2023  
[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202309-Patrick\\_Global%20Order\\_final.pdf?mc\\_cid=d5c36066dd&mc\\_eid=f69f067f4a](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202309-Patrick_Global%20Order_final.pdf?mc_cid=d5c36066dd&mc_eid=f69f067f4a)

23. "How to Avoid a Debt Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa," CNBC Africa, September 26, 2023 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/09/26/how-to-avoid-a-debt-crisis-in-sub-saharan-africa/>)

24. UN News, "Many countries spending more on debt than education, health and social protection combined," April 1, 2021 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1088852>)

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to visit in the wake of the Chinese or the Russians<sup>25</sup>, or simply declining to follow Northern Atlantic policy on the Ukraine war<sup>26</sup>. Attitudes toward the French have hardened, particularly in the Sahel and West Africa, where four recent military *coup d'états* (in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon) have pushed back on French influence and interests there. Memories of the long history of U.S. unilateral intervention in the Southern Atlantic (and elsewhere), or intuitive feelings of loyalty to Russia or China because of support they offered many countries in the Southern Atlantic at critical moments in the past, also present potential diplomatic obstacles. Moreover, the powers of Eurasia have been displacing the powers of the West in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean as economic, political, and military partners.

But these need not be insuperable barriers from a realist perspective. The realist imperative of the state—to act in its own national interest, to nurture and exercise its own national autonomy, and to act to guarantee its own national security and to safeguard its sovereignty—could go a long way in dissolving such barriers through ‘realist’ negotiated reciprocal trade-offs and interlocking diplomatic concessions within an Atlantic Basin cooperative framework. On the other hand, the realist perspective would also be a reminder that any new broad coalition—like the growing ‘BRICS-sphere,’ which has such a wide geographic and political reach, and which is characterized by such social and cultural diversity—will find it a difficult challenge to maintain sufficient internal unity to avoid cherry-picking by the West, or the unipolar alliance’s outright diplomatic and geostrategic fomenting of divisions.

The West could try to continue to reduce the current multipolar restructuring down to an overly simplistic narrative of a new Cold War, provoked solely by an inevitable Chinese drive for global dominance. Although such a rhetorical simplification might appeal to what is left of the once cherished notion of the U.S. as the benign hegemon and leader of the ‘Free World’ locked in another twilight struggle with another evil empire, it will probably not be enough to attract the genuine and committed collaboration of the states and peoples of the Southern Atlantic in new and meaningful pan-Atlanticism. The Northern Atlantic will need to offer more strategic value-added to potential partners in the Southern Atlantic.

Most importantly, from a strategic and realistically prudent point of view, the West (a.k.a. the Northern Atlantic Plus) should not respond to the rise of the Coalition of the Rest with a strong adversarial confrontation with BRICS Plus. This would be to repeat the mistake of the decades-old Northern Atlantic (i.e. NATO) strategy towards Russia (which eventually drove it closer to China, the opposite of the intended goal). Confronting BRICS Plus as an adversary—even if one actually believes that the Coalition of the Rest is nothing more than a diplomatic marriage of convenience among a group of authoritarian dictatorships, vengeful towards the West—is more likely than not to drive the Southern Atlantic states and peoples deeper into what are likely to be increasingly welcoming BRICS arms.

Nor should the Northern Atlantic engage in strategic cherry-picking or divide-and-conquer geostrategy. Rather, now more than ever, it is a realist strategic imperative for the Northern Atlantic to repair, improve, and deepen its relations with the Southern Atlantic as a collective, not just a subgroup of countries from Atlantic Africa or from the Caribbean basin. Short of a full-scale restoration of unipolarity, U.S. ‘full spectrum’ hegemony, and reinforced Western centrality within the liberal international order (a risky strategy with very uncertain chance of success), the best tool for meeting the strategic challenge posed by the coalition of the Rest—a ‘second best’ to the restoration strategy—is pan-Atlantic cooperation. Pan-Atlantic cooperation would provide an

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25. “More African Leaders are speaking up against lies from the West without fear,” African Insider, June 3, 2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zav3AzmbOk&t=100s>)

26. As at the recent EU-CELAC summit, for example.

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escape ramp from any Thucydides Trap and at least a partial antidote to the tragedy of great power politics. Any Northern Atlantic attempt at genuine strategic cooperation with the Southern Atlantic as a group on transnational issues and challenges (which directly engage their national and sub-basin regional interests) would have much less of a consolidating effect on BRICS Plus than an overt adversarial restoration strategy. Such an approach would also maintain the possibility of negotiation with BRICS Plus over proposed reforms to the UN and Bretton Woods systems (an outcome that is at least compatible with the maintenance of the *status quo* global governance order), instead of pushing BRICS Plus onto what is their implicit Plan B: the creation of an alternative BRICS international governance order. In the final analysis, pan-Atlantic cooperation is not only a tool for Atlantic actors across the basin, both north and south, to optimize their positions within the new realignment (and with it, their strategic autonomy), but also to simultaneously address the common challenges and opportunities that they share within the unique Atlantic Basin reality that are also of great strategic relevance not for only realists but also for the liberal and environmental perspectives.

In the unfolding context of new shifting alignment possibilities beyond unipolarity, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean gain increasing strategic importance: not only for the countries of the Northern Atlantic and the broader West, but also for the countries of Eurasia.

## About the Author, Paul Isbell

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He is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Transatlantic Leadership Network in Washington, D.C. He was an adjunct professor at the School of Global and Public Affairs of IE University in Madrid (2019-2022) where he taught energy, environmental governance and policy, the political economy of climate change, and global political economy.

Previously he was the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Fellow and the CAF Energy Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University SAIS. Prior to that he was a Senior Research Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid where, over the years, he was Senior Fellow for International Economy, the founder and director of the Energy and Climate Change Program, and a Senior Research Associate dedicated to US-Spain bilateral relations. He was an economic analyst for emerging market economies and currencies at Banco Santander and has taught at the undergraduate and graduate level at 14 universities on all Atlantic Basin continents. More recently he has been a climate change consultant for the World Resource Institute on land restoration in Latin America (WRI) and an energy and climate change consultant for the Inter-American Development Bank on low carbon transition.

Pr. Isbell is the author of *Energy and the Atlantic: The Shifting Energy Landscapes of the Atlantic Basin* (2012); co-author and editor of *The Future of Energy in the Atlantic Basin* (2015), and of *Energy and Transportation in the Atlantic Basin* (2017). He received a bachelor's degree in international economics from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a master's degree from the University of Dar es Salaam.

## About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South: A public good for strengthening public policy. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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