ARTICLE

Reality or Mirage?: BRICS and the Making of Multipolarity in the Global Political Economy

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ABSTRACT *The international system embarked on a process of transformation to a more heterogeneous configuration and debates of multipolarity acquired vibrancy in recent years. The formation of groupings such as the BRICS by emerging powers was interpreted as the harbinger of a novel global order. This study presents a nuanced account of recent global trends through a critical reading of the BRICS both as analytical category and an international actor. Thus, the heterogeneity of its members in terms of political regimes, economic strategies, geo-strategic alignments and national interest formations is emphasized. In contrast to premature 'power shift' arguments, a more subtle approach that underlines complex forms of interdependence between established and emerging global actors is proposed. Consequently, the BRICS is conceptualized as an 'international regime' operating relatively well in a specific field of international relations, nothing more.*

In the first decade of the new millennium, the international system embarked on a grand process of transformation from the short-lived and unipolar post-Cold War regime to an unprecedented and heterogeneous configuration of international relations and a global political economy. This profound transition is perceived to stem from a multifaceted shift from Western political, economic, and cultural predominance to a more diverse and sophisticated system in which emerging/resurgent powers increasingly assert their respective interest formulations, distinctive values and worldviews. Therefore, in the developing international system, the complex diversification and asymmetric distribution of national/regional and public/private power assets arguably create obstacles to the unilateral temptations of all global powers, albeit with varying degrees. The wider redistribution of political and economic power elements, as well as deepening interdependence among the established and new actors, are the fundamental ingredients of the emerging global order which render issues of global governance increasingly vital.

On the side of the global political economy, the main driving forces of the

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The major emerging powers were characterized by their strong desire to maximize economic capacity and to translate economic might into political influence in global platforms

emerging order have been the accelerated trends of global integration through transnational production networks, and strenuous flows of trade, finance, information and services. The perceptive change in the major parameters of the unipolar global political economy – dominated by the U.S. in the context of the 'embedded liberal compromise'[1] of the post-war era and two generations of neoliberalism since the 1980s (forms of Washington and Post-Washington Consensus) – acquired a new impetus with the global economic crisis after 2008. Mature industrial economies, conceptualized through the widespread notion of the 'Triad' – made up of the U.S., Western Europe and Japan – have become increasingly integrated and interdependent with several groups of emerging economic powers, led by China, India and Brazil, over the course of this transformation. These countries took bold steps toward integration with global capitalism by occupying prominent positions in the global supply chain and production networks, thanks to their unrivalled manufacturing potential and an untapped labor reservoir, thereby altering their impact on the global governance architecture. They were joined by countries controlling international energy flows (oil and natural gas) that had strong global leadership ambitions including some Gulf countries, but most notably the ambitious and resurgent Russia. Since the early 2000s, the emerging powers of the multipolar global political economy have been involved in a 'competitive game'[2] to build up commensurately large international reserves, acquired through trade surpluses from manufactures or energy exports. This, in turn, triggered massive capital flows from established capital markets in London, New York, Frankfurt and Tokyo to emerging financial hubs, which had huge consequences for the recognized norms and balances of the global financial system, including exchange rate volatilities and expanded opportunities for speculation. In the emerging system of multipolarity, major players such as China and Russia cautiously used their economic influence over Western politico-economic interests as a diplomatic tool to accelerate the transformation of global governance structures toward a more balanced *status quo*. The major revisionist bloc in the world economy including China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa (BRICS) triggered manifestations of Western (mainly Anglo-Saxon) anxiety concerning the future trajectory of transformation in the international economic order.

This article is aimed at presenting a critical account of the BRICS as an analytical category within the context of ongoing debates of multipolarity in the global political economy, which acquired added vibrancy in the aftermath of the recent global economic crisis. To this end, the evolution of theoretical debates in politics, political economy and development literatures are highlighted from the conventional center-periphery models to nuanced formulations of multipolarity. The historical evolution of the BRICS from an international investment strategy to a widely adopted symbol for the alleged decline of American/Western hegemony is evaluated by looking at various signals indicating the speed and reality of this decline. The premature, superficial or ideologically motivated characters of various analyses on 'hegemonic decline' and 'power shift' arguments are carefully underlined. Then, the internal composition and features of the five states comprising BRICS are studied in an attempt to show the high degree of heterogeneity in domestic political-economic regimes, geo-strategic alignments and national interest formations involved in this unorthodox grouping. In stark contrast to the exaggerated and generalized approaches depicting the categorical decline of American power and the rise of China or the BRICS in the global order, this study offers a subtle understanding of this systemic transformation by focusing on the wide scope of interdependence between the established and emerging actors of the global political economy. Therefore, it is preferred to conceptualize the BRICS as a relatively successful 'international regime' operating in a specifically designated field, rather than the harbinger of a profoundly novel global order. In the same vein, it is emphasized that decisive power instruments in international finance, trade, marketing, mass-media and global governance structures continue to reflect the interests and values of the 'triad,' despite the complex interdependence and more balanced distribution of power.

Challenging Conceptual Presumptions: From Center-Periphery to Nuanced Multipolarity

In the emerging landscape of the modern global political economy, sustained access to strategic natural resources and energy became a central element of economic competitiveness, which considerably expanded the interest areas of major powers across the world. Concurrently, the financial, commercial and productive factors of economic growth, as well as environmental sustainability and governance of global crises, provided the revised context of complex hegemonic struggles within deeper interdependence. This transformation stimulated a lively debate in many fields and literature about the prospective configuration and future trajectories of the main actors within the emerging international system. The major emerging powers were characterized by their strong desire to maximize economic capacity and to translate economic might into political influence in global platforms. The expansion of the playing field in the world economy led to pervasive anxieties in the Western world. Conservative political scientists and realist international relations scholars began asking what the transformed world economic order would look like, and whether this last 'global shift'[3] would instigate new international conflicts due to the intense competition over scarce economic and energy resources. On the other hand, liberal economists and liberal institutionalist international relations scholars drew attention to the emergence of a more inclusive and multipolar global political economy – one in which new players interact more substantially with established actors and form relations of complex interdependence.[4] This development was interpreted as a positive trend that could lead to world peace and stability, as sophisticated socioeconomic interdependencies could reduce the risks of military conflict and violence. At this juncture, a central issue arises concerning the nature of the shift from the conventional center-periphery model to multipolarity in the modern global political economy and what this means for the BRICS countries.

As stated, the classical center–periphery notion maintained that the world economy is organized around two poles that are linked to each other in an asymmetrical power relationship, whereby countries in the center control and influence developments in the periphery. Countries located in the center were considered preeminent in industrial manufacturing and therefore generated a consistent trade surplus, which they exported to the peripheral areas via financial capital, which institutionalized relationships of financial dependency. Moreover, the flow of trade was largely in a unidirectional form, with high-value industrial goods exchanged for primary goods, commodities and low-value consumption goods.[5] During the era of financial liberalization, the classical center-periphery model has been updated to include countries with open capital markets and market-determined floating exchange rates, such as the U.S., the U.K. and members of the Euro zone in the center; meanwhile, countries with relatively closed capital markets and managed exchange rates – China, Russia, East Asia and Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries – were placed in the periphery, or semi-periphery of the global system.[6] Accordingly, this updated model assumes that the center in the system undertakes the central role of issuing the main international reserve currency and maintaining its stability in terms of purchasing power over tradable goods and services. In this nuanced conceptualization, the ability to maintain market efficiency in the presence of floating exchange rates (the norm in advanced capitalist economies after the 1980s) is indicative of maturity and depth in financial markets, as well as the effectiveness of the established rules and institutions that safeguard monetary and fiscal stability.[7] On the other hand, countries in the periphery and semi-periphery are assumed to face serious problems in maintaining a floating exchange rate due to their structural and institutional deficiencies – as a result of which they peg

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BRICS leaders Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, South Africa's President Jacob Zuma, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, pose for a family photo in Durban on March 27, 2013.

AFP / Alexander Joe

their currency to major international currencies, or closely guard their national financial systems.

However, as the transformation of the modern global political economy has been predominantly driven by the emergence of rapidly growing economic actors, it became necessary to construct a new paradigm that reflects the complexity of this new order.[8] Inspired by nuanced political science analyses that replaced the binary Cold War approaches and theories on American hegemony or Empire, various conceptualizations of multipolarity best captured the complexity of the modern world economy: with its changing cast of actors, an expanding playing field, intricate relations of mutual interdependence, and fiercely contested global governance norms and structures.[9]A deepening integration among the 'triad' of established industrial economies and the considerable expansion of global financial markets caused the term 'economic power' to have a broader definition, comprising various public and private actors like the multinational corporations and sovereign investment funds. The diffusion of economic power resources progressed along with global economic integration and widening channels of finance, trade, information and services; thereby offering opportunities for further empowerment of newly emerging powers.[10] Due to this diffusion of power, formerly hegemonic actors in the global political economy had a diminished ability to effectively shape and influence the preferences of other actors. Therefore, exerting leadership on issues of general concern and matters of global governance has become more difficult and required intensive multilateral consensus-seeking. This was proved by the early international panic in the aftermath of the global economic crisis and the gradual emergence of concerted responses by both developed and developing country governments, central banks and international institutions.

The sheer size of national economic units in the current system as measured in terms of GDP or relatively increased involvement in what Joseph Nye called 'transnational relations'[11] might confer countries into the dimension of national autonomy –the capacity for autonomous economic decision-making and implementation. However, these factors alone do not necessarily grant them power to influence the fundamental preferences of other actors.[12] As a corollary of this, analyses of nuanced multipolarity in the global political economy should not focus only on the size of national economies, their enmeshment with global market relations, or actual/projected GDP growth figures; instead they should highlight the sources and speed of capital accumulation capacity, as well as the aptitude to utilize international reserves as a political asset in making foreign policies. Crucial dimensions of potential or actual power/influence in the global political economy – such as industrial capacity, technological know-how and natural resources with commercial value – should also be given due weight. Yet it bears repeating that the respective distribution of military power and spending capacity in the international system continues to reflect a unipolar structure which maintains and augments the political dominance of the U.S., despite the efforts of Russia and China to constitute countervailing military-political potentials.[13]

There have been relatively few attempts to conceptualize the BRICS as a consistent analytical category, or to evaluate the prevailing discourse of the BRICS toward the transformation of global order

The multipolar global structure reflects a sophisticated network of channels between established industrial economies and emerging economic powers, where non-state actors play a prominent role alongside nation-states. Therefore, multifaceted forms of interaction are established between the transnational capitalist market economy and the neo-Westphalian system of competing nation-states.[14] Intense international capital flows in this multipolar structure serve to connect major poles to others via constant circulation of financial resources for speculative purposes, as well as to finance the production and trade of goods, services and commodities. Numerous poles in the developing multipolar economic system include established actors (the Triad) as well as emerging powers (BRICS) and political newcomers (second-generation NICs), all with sufficient ambition and ability to influence the future of the global economic order, and thus the notions of power and influence are constantly redefined in the light of material developments in the world economy.

Reflecting the unresolved dichotomy between the autonomy of the market and the autonomy of the nation-state, international forums dealing with financial issues (the Anglo-American axis, G-10, Basel and Gold Pool) have proliferated in recent decades, where national policy makers strive to maximize their influence on market transactions. In the case of the emerging powers, state autonomy is generally used to restrict and suppress market autonomy through public or private agents; this serves to keep domestic and international economic imbalances and financial instability under control in the absence of effective regulations. But when market actors acquire sufficient power and influence, they graduate from being economic allies of political actors to the role of international actors in their own right, as illustrated by the Japanese *Keiretsus* and the Korean *Chaebols*. The key issue at this junction concerns the critical trade-offs and systemic risks that arise from being part of a globally integrated capitalist market and the potential politico-economic costs of restraining market integration.

The Brics and Global Transformations: 'Unity in Diversity'

Historically speaking, the term 'BRICS,' indicating the emerging actors of a multipolar global political economy, was indiscriminately adopted by policy-makers, academia and mass media outlets in the 2000s despite its shaky analytical underpinnings. Although at its inception in 2003 the concrete economic might of the group represented only 15 percent of the cumulative GDP's of the U.S., Japan, Germany, Britain, France and Italy, it was predicted that in less than 40 years the BRICS would catch up with the six industrial economies and become the world's principal engine of demand growth and spending power.[15] There were several practical reasons for the swift adoption and widespread utilization of the BRICS[16] acronym, including: its incontestable mnemonic and symbolic virtues; the simplicity of identifying prospective challengers of Western hegemony as specific states that could be easily located on a mental map; and that it allowed the substantiation of the 'power shift' hypothesis by providing comparative figures from a specific set of countries. However, there have been relatively few attempts to conceptualize the BRICS as a consistent analytical category, or to evaluate the prevailing discourse of the BRICS toward the transformation of global order, or the impact of BRICS on wider discussions of international relations and global governance over time.[17] Mainstream economics literature predominantly followed the generalizing approaches of Jim O'Neill and his colleagues at Goldman Sachs by identifying the BRICS as an 'engine of global growth' along with other emerging economies. In the political science literature, however, there has emerged a strong trend to isolate the group members and analyze their respective foreign policy preferences separately. This is understandable in light of the atypical characteristics of the BRICS group that do not fit into the conventional definition of a regional (i.e. EU) or international (i.e. OPEC) organization, and the still-hesitant attitude of group members to determine common political positions on major international issues.

However, this unorthodox grouping of emerging economic powers is constructed on the basis of certain features which constitute a common denominator among member states: BRICS countries are substantial in terms of their populations and dominate their respective regions – and the globe for some – in terms of vast demographic potential. When combined, these countries constitute the largest economic bloc outside the industrialized countries in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with impressive economic growth figures and large domestic markets with considerable expansion capacity. Yet, at the same time, they are regarded as developing countries in international comparisons, due to their substantial developmental needs, regional income disparities, informal economic sectors and poverty alleviation necessities. When it comes to their principal geo-strategic alignments and security constellations, the BRICS group comprises countries that generally adopt autonomous positions and stay distanced from politico-military frameworks considered to be NATO-type or Western dominated – while also avoiding special security relations with Western powers exemplified by the relations between the U.S. and Japan or South Korea.

BRICS countries frequently coalesce around strategies designed to demand relatively larger influence and decision-making authority in international economic and financial institutions

From a different angle, as major regional powers with strong political ambitions, the BRICS countries have historical legacies based on the contestation of Western hegemony in the international system through communist, socialist, or non-aligned discourses. As such, they could easily associate themselves with the classical or revamped versions of Third Worldism that stressed built-in inequalities of the Bretton Woods system, or exigencies of global capitalism exercised through multinational corporations. However, occasional confrontations on vital national interests notwithstanding, the political elites in these states maintain a large measure of respect for American power when determining their policy options.[18] Despite widely elaborated arguments of gradual decline, the BRICS countries seem convinced that pushing implicitly toward a multipolar global political economy and inter-state system through 'soft actions' would better serve their fundamental long-term interests.

Therefore, the BRICS countries frequently coalesce around strategies designed to demand relatively larger influence and decision-making authority in international economic and financial institutions – such as the International Monetary

Fund (IMF), World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) – and global governance platforms such as the U.N. The success of more participatory, informal governance platforms (such as the G-20 instead of the restrictive G-8) in the aftermath of the global economic crisis should be attributed to mounting pressure from the BRICS countries and other emerging economic powers for a more inclusive and participative global governance framework. However, these parallelisms do not constitute a firm enough ground to refute claims that the BRICS group lacks internal coherence; that the notion of BRICS as an analytical set is a 'mirage' enforced superficially for specific political agendas;[19] that BRICS countries are dissimilar national units with radically different political/ geo-strategic interests; and that these countries do not constitute a natural trading bloc.[20] In fact, a careful evaluation of the individual BRICS members would reveal radical differences in terms of domestic political structures, economic capacities, regional environments and links to major global powers.

Summarily, 'undemocratic capitalist'[21] China, which has recently become the global center of manufacturing industries and the export platform of transnational production networks, is perceived as the *de facto* economic leader of the BRICS group.[22] The post-totalitarian neo-communist regime in Beijing has formed a new developmental model whereby political legitimacy required for the sustainability of a post-1993 'market socialism' is largely drawn from uninterrupted economic growth and improvements in social standards. The international dimension of this model is posing as a de-territorialized, post-modern great power focused on taking advantage of the benefits of global economic integration and striving to accelerate the evolution of the global political economy toward a multipolar configuration.[23] In this context, BRICS is generally cited as one of the main institutional instruments employed by the Beijing administration to spearhead a multi-pronged strategy of instigating transformations in the global order without directly challenging the U.S.; in other words, applying the Confucian ethos in diplomacy through expanding the ranks and 'leading from behind.'

For its part, Russia historically has been the most vocal proponent for the foundation and institutionalization of the BRICS as a *sui generic* platform of international cooperation. The obvious rationale behind this derived from the desires of the neo-patriotic political elite, led by President Vladimir Putin, to command a prevalent role on the world stage by supplementing their diminished military/geo-strategic capacity inherited from the Cold War era with the economic, technological and demographic potential of China.[24] From the prism of political alignments, Russia has been seeking international allies outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in an effort to maintain some semblance of the dominance it enjoyed during the Cold War, and its most obvious long-term ally has been China. In this respect, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been quite influential, by defusing hegemonic rivalry between the two post-socialist powers over Central Asia and constituting the institutional anchor of a new regional order. On the other hand, Russia's excessive economic dependence on the export of petrol, natural gas, military technology and nuclear energy equipment is conceived as the Achilles' heel for a systematic push forward strong and sustained economic growth. Therefore, it became imperative for Russia to develop an economic alliance with two of its foremost regional rivals and potential partners – China and India – and the project to transform the BRICS from an investment strategy to a coalition of emerging powers in international relations[25] had Moscow's fingerprints all over it. In retrospect, Russia's public diplomacy toward the institutionalization of the BRICS and the development of a widespread awareness within the global public opinion concerning the idea of a multipolar global economic – and, increasingly, political – order could be considered one of Moscow's most successful international initiatives in recent decades.

The third major member of the BRICS group, India, a well-established parliamentary democracy, has traditionally followed a defensive foreign policy and economic strategy, as a result of which the 'porcupine image' of the country was galvanized as the national hallmark until the 1990s.[26] Demographically comparable only to China, India undertook a profound initiative of structural transformation in the last decades to create the basis for the emergence of an expanded middle class and knowledge economy. But the momentum of economic growth was not sufficient enough to alleviate widespread and acute poverty. Therefore structural transformation in the country advanced sporadically in the absence of adequate infrastructural investment, coupled with ever-widening regional and class-based income disparities, which undermined some of the most fundamental underpinnings of societal cohesion. Furthermore, despite two decades of economic liberalization, the main actors in the Indian economy and the reflexes of regulative state agencies remained relatively inward-oriented, and its export performance pales in comparison to the 'Asian Tigers' of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong.[27]

Nevertheless, the Delhi administration successfully built upon the accumulated legacy of diplomatic activism in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and acquired a major status in global platforms of economic diplomacy – such as the G-20 and the WTO – by stubbornly defending the interests of the global South. The vibrant interest of India's political establishment in the BRICS initiative should be interpreted in this wider context of seeking a more effective and honorable position in the evolving international system by becoming one of the major global representatives of the developing world. However, as opposed to their Russian and Chinese counterparts, the mainstream political elites in India are extremely reluctant to place their diplomatic pro-activism on an anti-American ideological footing, and always prefer to coordinate sensitive decisions on global issues with the Washington administration.[28] Moreover, the refined tradition of diplomatic activism in India prevents the articulation of a clear alternative strategy for the global order by the policy makers, or exaggerated national aspirations in the form of a typical revisionist power. Therefore, India's involvement in the discursive and practical endeavors of BRICS is maintained despite deeply entrenched suspicions about China's regional and global dominance intentions, and reserved rapprochement with Russia at a time when U.S.-India relations have reached their historical peak.[29]

The five members of the BRICS represent an unorthodox grouping of emerging powers in the global political economy with radically different political settings, economic structures, social formations and developmental challenges throughout the world

When it comes to the fourth major actor in the BRICS, Brazil, it might seem more plausible at first glance to group this crucial country with Argentina, Mexico, Chile or Venezuela as the naturally conceived regional leader of Latin America in terms of its demographic, economic and political capacities. However, unprecedented enthusiasm of the Brazilian leadership in the BRICS process should be viewed in the context of its disappointing diplomatic record in the 20th century of unilateral and bilateral actions outside the perimeters of Latin America. Having weathered successive storms of financial/macroeconomic crisis in the 1990s and the early 2000's, Brazil was successfully transformed into an effective policy entrepreneur under Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Roussef, who mobilized the soft-power potential of this peaceful country through multilateral activism.[30] Building upon a moderate interpretation of Latin American socialism, Brazil strongly contested various elements of the global economic order that held back developing countries from autonomous development, and also firmly maintained its critical position on issues of global inclusion and distributive justice.[31]

In terms of its pro-development discourse, insistence on global governance reforms, overhaul of the global trading regime and a tendency to enhance its reputation by forming comprehensive multilateral alliances, Brazil's attitude is comparable to fellow BRICS India, South Africa and China. Yet despite its revisionist discourse and great power aspirations, Brazil, like India, carefully avoids raising a plainly anti-American or anti-Western foreign policy stance, or redefine its geo-strategic preferences accordingly.[32] This is understandable, given the robust connections between Brazil and the Western world through cultural affinity (Catholicism), imperial history, geography, as well as strong attachment to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. In this respect, Brazil's foreign policy activism through economic diplomacy, conflict resolution initiatives and mediation in third party issues progressed parallel to Turkey's proactive foreign policy in recent years, as exemplified by the two countries' collaborative efforts to strike a deal (known as the Tehran Agreement) between Iran and the Western world. Yet, Brazil undoubtedly benefited from the geo-strategic advantage of being remote from the main flashpoints in the Middle East, which effectively interrupted Turkey's soft-power-based ascendance in the first decade of the new millennium.

Finally, South Africa is generally portrayed as a special member of the BRICS, and became a full member in February 2011 despite the strong lobbying efforts for accession by several emerging economic powers such as Turkey, Mexico and Indonesia.[33] The entry of South Africa into the BRICS group was regarded as a predominantly symbolic political step designed to expand the reach of BRICS to the strategically critical African continent. South Africa was considered a major regional power in regards to its soft-power credentials derived from the peaceful transition from the apartheid regime to a functioning democracy and unilateral disarmament of its nuclear arsenal.[34] Moreover, the moral authority derived from the legacy of Nelson Mandela that established South Africa as the locus of regional peace and stability was galvanized by its stubborn championing of the interests of the global South in multilateral fora, parallel to the initiatives of India and Brazil.[35]

It would not be wise to portray the BRICS as the nucleus of a future political or security community

Although South Africa is the largest African economy and the only African member of G-20, its status as a natural member of the BRICS representing the most dynamic and vibrant national economies in the world seemed unwarranted, for a number of reasons. Both the size and dynamism of its economic structure are not comparable to other BRICS members; its industrial infrastructure and entrepreneurial environment are fragile; economic growth is lackluster; and there are increasing grounds for skepticism about the quality of economic management architecture.[36] There have been various question marks surrounding the material basis of South Africa's BRICS membership in view of structural barriers to sustainable growth stemming from social, political and economic fields.[37]

As the foregoing analysis suggests, the five members of the BRICS represent an unorthodox grouping of emerging powers in the global political economy with radically different political settings, economic structures, social formations and developmental challenges throughout the world. India, Brazil and South Africa are considered to be functioning democracies, while China and Russia – which determine the main political character of the group – represent a 'market socialist' people's republic and a semi-authoritarian regime. In terms of economics, China, Russia and (to a lesser extent) Brazil have been systematically producing substantial trade surpluses, while India and South Africa battle structural problems that continue to trigger persistent trade deficits. As a consequence of this internal differentiation, the latter two traditionally have relatively higher public debt/GDP ratios compared to their fellow BRICS. Russia represents an exceptional case due to the concentration of its exports in petrol, natural gas and other energy products, while the other four countries display more diversified national export profiles. Finally, the BRICS members are not immune to challenges that could potentially hamper their impressive economic progress. These dangers include: acute environmental pollution, shortages of natural resources and increasing domestic inequalities in China;[38] insufficient physical infrastructure, acute poverty and malicious communal conflicts in India; an inability to sustain a high growth momentum, endemic corruption and problems of urban transformation in Brazil; and the lack of rule of law, persistent corruption, Mafioso capital and vulnerability to the natural resource curse in Russia; and problems of urbanization associated with lackluster economic growth and low quality governance in South Africa. Given the myriad factors signaling political and economic differentiation among its member states, it would not be wise to portray the BRICS as the nucleus of a future political or security community. Instead, an alternative approach to the main rationale and function of the BRICS initiative should adopt a more limited perspective, focusing on the cumulative impact and vision of the group to trigger gradual transformation in the global political economy by instituting an international regime.

Multipolarity in Perspective: Conceptualizing Brics as an International Regime

There are numerous examples of successful international cooperation over the course of the last century, where states with essentially opposing national social formations and politico-economic structures collaborated within organizational frameworks, thereby projecting their combined influence into the international arena. In more marginal cases, even states that have been in physical/military conflict with each other have been able to cooperate on long-term, issue-specific (especially economic) platforms.[39] One clear illustration of this comes from the BRICS whereby Russia, China and India have been involved in concerted action to improve their positions within the international economic institutions (such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO) despite ongoing geopolitical competition among them in the northern, central and southern parts of Asia. This state of affairs clearly shows that conventional geopolitical rivalries and inter-state tensions do not necessarily prevent sophisticated form of cooperation in a world of intense economic globalization and interdependence.

As previously stressed, the principle themes that frequently resurface in critiques of the BRICS are mainly constructed upon an incorrect assumption, depicting the group as the nucleus of a future political or security community that would somehow replace the current establishment colored by Western-dominated institutions and values. It must be stressed that this alarmist stance, if not motivated by sharp ideological dispositions and organic links with Western policy-making circles, reflects a deeply embedded conceptual confusion. Projects aimed at collaboration among states with diverging or clashing national interests in multiple areas are generally deemed unrealistic. But the possibility of collaboration in a specific area becomes more understandable when the narrower definition by Stephen Krasner is adopted for an international regime as 'inter-state cooperation on the basis of certain norms and principles in a given area of international relations.'[40] Accordingly, one of the main contentions of this study is that the BRICS should be conceptualized as a nascent international regime focused on transforming the international trade/finance architecture and structures of global economic governance toward a more multipolar manner.

Gradual insertion of multipolarity in these fields is assumed to potentially increase the individual and collective influence of the states shaping the regime in the wider global order. The BRICS countries certainly have many diverging interests in other areas of international relations, but this disparity is not a threat to the maintenance and further development of the group, as these do not fall within the specified remit of the BRICS regime. This regime has been constantly evolving through the principles, norms and forms of action created through multilateral diplomacy at the BRICS summits and other international meetings, arguably toward the goal of enabling the emerging economies to acquire greater representation in international financial institutions. The legitimation function, in turn, is performed by championing the cause of the developing world for political and economic emancipation, along with rational collaboration of emerging powers for increased weight in global fora. There is no evidence indicating that the joint actions of the BRICS members are evolving toward more generalized collaboration in the broader realms of politics, national security and foreign policy.

Since the foundation of the group, an intense process of institutional learning was observed in key policy-makers in Russia, China, Brazil, India and South Africa whereby a common political rhetoric was adopted around the ideals of multipolarity, equality, greater voice and participation in global governance. Thus, utility-maximizing calculations within the BRICS have been replaced by deliberate role-playing by the political elites who adopted mutual expectations and similar discourses in international platforms.[41] Yet, this is obviously a rather superficial form of intra-group socialization that does not have a profound impact on the domestic structures, value systems and political-economic regimes of the members. Therefore, premature analyses of the BRICS should be treated with exteme caution, especially if they declare a profound transition from the pragmatic compact of economic governance to a fledgling international community based on generalized political and security collaboration.

In concrete terms, the relative success of an international regime could be objectively measured by highlighting the visible outcomes of the joint actions undertaken by its member states to influence one aspect of the global order in a specific direction. Even before the formal foundation of the BRICS, it was foreseen that the collective efforts of the members within the G-20 was forcing concessions from the U.S. and the EU on issues of international trade, agriculture and subsidies.[42] In this respect, a minor success of the BRICS group has been the realization of a 5 per cent redistribution in the voting rights of the IMF and a 3 per cent distribution in the voting rights of the World Bank in favor of emerging powers and developing countries with the contributions of the BRICS. However, these symbolic results are still insufficient to justify the global authority of the BRICS as a regime that constantly produces norms, rules and patterns of action in a specific area. Clearly more substantial success stories would be required to provide institutional justification for the BRICS in the eyes of the developing world, as well as maintaining the ambitious revisionist political rhetoric in the long term.

Conclusion: The Future of the Brics and the Global Political Economy

This study constitutes a theoretically-informed attempt to evaluate the widely popularized group of BRICS in the light of widening debates of multipolarity in the global political economy. To this end, it assessed the term BRICS as a consistent analytical category; analyzed dynamics of intra-group divergence among the BRICS countries; attempted to conceptualize the BRICS as a nascent regime operating in a specific area of international relations, namely the reform of global trade and finance structures, as well as international governance architecture in a multipolar manner; and, finally, argued that premature propositions about the imminent decline of American hegemony in the global order, and the 'Rise of the Rest' expressed through the BRICS group, must be placed in proper perspective.

In recent writings in the mainstream political science and economics literatures, skeptics of the BRICS from different persuasions have posed two main arguments while questioning the status of the group as the locus of a multipolar and balanced global order, while making projections for its prospective disintegration. The former relates to profound structural differences and the ever-growing power/capacity differentials among the member states (particularly between China, which became the main counterpart of the U.S. in global governance issues, and the rest of the BRICS members). The latter, on the other hand, concentrates on the profound dynamics of diversification among the member states' national interest constellations and identifies BRICS as a 'paper exercise' – heavy on rhetorical flourish but unlikely to change the unipolar status quo, notwithstanding the formation of a *de facto* G-2 between the U.S. and China.[43] While acknowledging internal contradictions of this tenuously institutionalized grouping and lack of homogeneity among the BRICS members raised by critics, this article argued that a more refined political economy analysis ought to concentrate on the particular kinds of current and future impact that these states aim to exert on the transformation trajectory of the global order. Such a nuanced approach is more congruent with modern politico-economic alliance formations, whereby countries with seemingly different power assets, political cultures and historical legacies might choose to cooperate on a specified area of international relations.

It was also acknowledged that the institutional structure of the BRICS has not yet reached maturity, and it is doubtful it ever will; as the members display a preference for autonomous decision-making on issues of vital national interest. From this angle, students of global political economy were urged to thoroughly question the potential of a heterogeneous grouping with volatile institutional foundations to spearhead a transformation in the established parameters of global governance, which requires complex and coordinated diplomacy. An equally important factor emphasized in the study concerned the lack of transparency in intra-BRICS negotiations on critical global isssues, which might provide clues concerning divergence and future prospects of relations among the members. It was stressed that the relative success or failure of an international regime is generally assessed by looking at concrete policy outcomes achieved in a certain period of time, and the success of the BRICS regime could be objectively evaluated in the coming decades. Nevertheless, it must be added that the visible failure of common actions undertaken by an international regime does not necessarily mean that member states would perceive their participation as worthless or want to leave the regime. Therefore, common objectives concerning the future trajectory of the global political economy could encourage the BRICS members to maintain their loyalty to the regime even in the absence of concrete sucesses on global platforms.

Following Michael Glosny, it is safe to assert that the BRICS members do the following: stabilize the international environment and prevent encirclement; exchange ideas and experiences; coordinate common positions and improve their bargaining positions with Western countries; hide in a group to avoid negative attention while advancing their agenda; help other developing countries; strengthen their identity as developing countries; restrain American hegemony and revisionism; and minimize dependence on the U.S. by exploring other options.[44] These benefits acquired from association with the group demonstrate that the BRICS countries have sufficient reasons to continue their cooperation in the medium and long term,even if some of their joint actions for reforming global governance structures end up failing. It is equally unrealistic to assume that the BRICS will disintegrate in the near future due to its failure to achieve concrete changes in global governance structures, or that the initiative will be extended toward generalized political and security cooperation to constitute the basis of an alternative global order.

Endnotes

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5. Benjamin Cohen, "Bretton Woods System," *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 84–91.

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8. Even the FED Chairman Ben Bernanke stressed in various occasions that the classical center-periphery model of the global order is insufficient to reflect the complexities of today's world economy.

9. Kapp aptly stresses the underpinnings of preferences by emerging economic powers such as China in favor of multipolarity to promote their global status and weaken that of the U.S. and Europe. See, Robert A. Kapp, "The Big Crap Shoot," *China Economic Quarterly,* Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 2008), p. 27.

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12. Benjamin J. Cohen, "The Macro Foundations of Monetary Power," David Andrews (ed.) *International Monetary Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 31.

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14. Geoffrey Underhill, "Conceptualizing the Changing Global Order," Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey Underhill, *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 21; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 273; Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 11.

15. Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050," *Global Economics Paper,* No. 99 (New York: Goldman Sachs, October 2003), p. 2.

16. The letter 'S' was added to the acronym when South Africa formally joined the group in February 2011. In this study, the terms 'BRIC' and 'BRICS' are used to refer to the periods before and after the participation of South Africa.

17. Ngai-Ling Sum's study on the "cultural political economy of the BRICS" should be noted as a crucial exception as it examines the rise of discourses about the BRICS economies and their implications for power shifts in the world system. See Ngai-Ling Sum, 'The Centring of (Semi-) Peripheral Economies: A Cultural Political Economy of 'BRIC' and the Case of China," *PROKLA: Zeitschrift für Kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2010), pp. 543-566.

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35. Yolanda Kemp Spies, "South Africa's Multilateral Challenges in a 'Polypolar' World," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2010), pp. 75-78.

36. Draper, "For How Long Can South Africa 'Punch Above Its Weight'?," p. 211.

37. Andreasson, "Africa's Prospects and South Africa's Leadership Potential in the Emerging Markets Century," p. 1165.

38. Over the course of the last decade China witnessed one of the fastest cases of deterioration in human history in the Gini coefficient which displays inequalities in income distribution, transcending even the infamous Latin American cases.

39. In this context, one of the most frequently cited examples of international cooperation concerns the cooperation of Iran and Iraq under the rubric of the OECD to maintain the high-level of petrol prices in global markets while they were involved in a war in the 1980s.

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43. Sinha and Dorschner, "India: Rising Power or a Mere Revolution of Rising Expectations?," p. 88.

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