

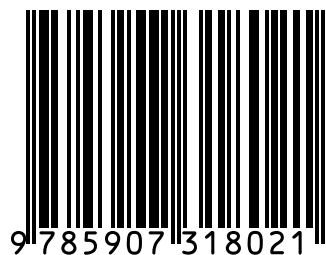


BRICS and the Rivalry Pandemic

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ISBN 978-5-907318-02-1



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The authors of this report express gratitude to the participants of the round-table discussion “BRICS: Between deepening and expanding” that was held at the Valdai Discussion Club on 17 December 2019.

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The authors express their appreciation to Leo Sokolshchik, research fellow at the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies, Higher School of Economics, for the help in drawing up the positions of China, India, Brazil, and South Africa on the basis of the round-table discussion.

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The Crumbling of the World Order and the Search for New Global Governance Tools

The history of states' attempts to work collectively to overcome new challenges as they emerge dates back a little more than 200 years from the creation of the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine beloved by all students of international relations. This is a negligible span of time in the history of humankind as a collection of social organizations, and yet this period contains within it the entire rise and fall of the balance of power system in Europe, two world wars, and the emergence of nation states and international institutions. In other words, these 200 years shaped the global political and economic reality in which we live. The Westphalian order – leaving aside the debate over when exactly it arose – gave states a basic code of conduct. The era following the Napoleonic Wars in Europe made it clear that there are problems best addressed collectively, and that the interests of one state cannot be considered separately from the interests of the rest.

The BRICS community of nations did not come out of nowhere. The luminaries of international consulting (one of them, Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O'Neill, coined the BRIC acronym) come up with brilliant new ideas on an almost daily basis, but only a few of them get the attention of the statesmen steering the foreign policy and development of their countries. However, it would be wrong to credit O'Neill alone for the formation of most authoritative non-western association of countries. After all, the foundation of BRICS was laid back in the mid-1990s by the foreign minister and later prime minister of Russia Yevgeny Primakov. It was then that the concept of diversifying Russia's foreign policy – the political triangle comprising Russia, India and China (RIC) – was formulated, and efforts were also made to bolster our country's interaction with Latin America. For Goldman Sachs and the rest, the BRIC product was just a marketing ploy that created a collective image of the developing or transitioning economies with the greatest investment potential.

This idea did not get off the ground in the last decade of the 20th century due to a number of objective factors. However, by just the mid-2000s, BRICS

emerged out of the changes reshaping international relations – the rise of non-western centres of power, the relative decline of the West, and the quick end of the “unipolar moment” proclaimed in the early 1990s.

It was in the mid-2000s that the quantitative growth indicators of the leading non-western countries took on a political dimension. States began to refuse to go along with the West’s leading role in the world and to demand a greater say in the most important matters of the global economy, politics and security. Most of them were excluded from the prevailing global governance mechanisms like the G8 or played a decidedly marginal role in terms of decision-making in organizations like the IMF and the World Bank. For example, the expanded G8 partnership (outreach) which, beginning in 2005, included the five largest developing economies and the Heiligendamm process institutionalized in 2007, implied working with developing economies on a limited number of matters without granting full voting rights to the invited countries. Interestingly, there was a hostile response initially among the other G8 members to Russia’s initiative during its 2006 chairmanship to continue working with the largest emerging economies, engage them in cooperation and inform them about the discussion process in the G8. The United States and the EU stubbornly refused to give the new global economic centres any real power in the Bretton Woods institutions. China was repeatedly invited to the meetings of the group’s finance ministers, but only to be pressured over the renminbi exchange rate.

Nonetheless, the Heiligendamm dialogue ultimately played a positive role, primarily by giving Russia another format in which to regularly compare notes with invited states, revealing where their positions overlapped on a number of the most important aspects of their activities. For example, non-western centres of power shared many basic approaches to the international order and global governance. They recognized the central role of the UN and the principles of the UN Charter, the importance of state sovereignty, and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs; they took a critical approach to interventionism, imposing democracy on nations by force, and organizing colour revolutions; they showed respect for civilizational diversity and pluralism in models of national development, and demanded a greater say in global governance and sought a more equitable world order in general.

As a result, non-western powers began to form their own institutions to promote their common interests and increase the international weight of each individually. BRIC was the main such institution.

For the first time ever, an association emerged at the global level that did not answer to the West. It expanded and grew stronger in spite of the West. With the accession of South Africa in 2011, BRIC became BRICS and continued on as a group of five countries that serves as a symbol of multipolarity and the end of the brief post-Cold War period of western hegemony.

From the outset, BRICS was important to its member countries not only as a means of promoting the national interests of each through multilateral cooperation, but also gaining a greater say in global governance for developing non-western countries. As the United States and the EU grew weaker relative to rising non-western centres of power in the mid-2000s, the West and its institutions could no longer promise effective global governance alone. At that time, the United States was bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and was essentially unable to direct global developments as it wanted. In the failure of the EU Constitution, the EU faced its first development crisis since the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the western states missed or ignored the emergence of new claimants for the role of key global powers. Back in the era of unipolarity, the United States tried to create the Group of 22 and the Group of 33 which were associations of countries picked by Washington without consulting other states. However, these never became regular formats and sustainable mechanisms. The Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate was rejected by Europe after this idea was advanced by George W. Bush, but enthusiastically embraced after Barack Obama recycled the same proposal, though it did not gain much real traction in the end. The most successful attempt to engage emerging economies was the western countries' response to the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998. The G20 mechanism was launched at the level of finance minister and central bank governor meetings in 1999.

Global governance arguably ceased to be the sole province of the West only with the 2008 global economic crisis. It was then that the G20 was promoted to the level of heads of state who, that same year, got together for the first time in this format, in Washington, the epicentre of the financial and economic crisis that had swept the world. The launch of the G20 was a clear indication of the Western countries' inability to overcome the crisis and conduct global governance without non-Western centres of power. BRICS, on the other hand, made it possible for the latter to coordinate approaches

and positions within the G20 with one another, and to act as a united front on matters of common interest.

Despite scepticism, primarily in the West, and criticism that the five BRICS nations have nothing in common (which is not true as they are united by similar approaches to the international order and global governance, as well as similar problems and challenges), the association has been in existence for more than 10 years now, and all member countries see their participation in the organization as useful and important regardless of the vagaries of domestic politics and rotating elites.

In addition to seeking greater sway in global governance and international relations in general, to form a more equitable (polycentric) world order, the member countries have worked to maintain and bolster BRICS in the period 2009–2019 in the face of the objective reality that the entire geopolitical system is in decline – what the annual Valdai report of 2018¹ called the “crumbling” of the international order that took shape after World War II and survived 1991 with minor changes.

Competition followed by open rivalry began to intensify between the United States and the EU, on the one hand, and key non-western centres of power like Russia and China, on the other hand. Russian-US relations reached the level of acute confrontation in 2014, followed by Chinese-US relations in 2017. This paralyzed global decision-making at institutions such as the UN Security Council, and turned almost the entire world into an arena of rivalry between the great powers.

The negative consequences of globalization have led to an increase in egoism, nationalism and unilateralism in the politics of an increasing number of major powers. The Trump administration’s slogan, America First, is case in point. However, this is not unique to the United States. The prevailing principle adopted not only by global, but also regional players is “each before all,” which undeniably adds to the overall chaos, and weakens order and governability. The rampant increase in national egoism has shown itself clearly during the coronavirus epidemic of 2020 where the efforts to combat the pandemic have mainly come at the level of individual states and often to the detriment of neighbours, and the scale of foreign aid has been meagre even within the EU.

¹*Living in a Crumbling World. Valdai Club Annual Report.* <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/zhizn-v-osypayushchetsya-mire/> (Accessed: 15 October, 2018).

At the same time, the democratization of international relations has begun to intensify. Regional power centres refuse to follow in the wake of the global leaders and insist on having an independent policy and a prominent role in managing their corresponding regions. Without their full-fledged participation, the international order will break down at the regional level. This only further reveals the paucity of exclusively western-centric formats and their inability to maintain order and control their forces.

The “crumbling” of the previous order naturally gives rise to attempts to create new institutions if not for global governance, then at least for coordinating the actions of individual countries as they pursue their vital national interests. The BRICS countries have sought such coordination to strengthen the position of each of the five member countries, not only for the sake of their own stability amid a rising tide of chaos, but to lift up the voice of developing countries in general. The main challenge such associations face is determining, at both the theoretical and practical levels, their goals, the capabilities of different members and their degree of real impact on global politics and economics.

BRICS: Global Governance amid Pandemic Rivalry

When it spearheaded the creation of BRICS in the mid-2000s, Moscow was unlikely under any illusion that this association could become a full-fledged global governance institution in the liberal western sense of the word, i.e. a structure at the centre of the production of global public goods and the development of advanced standards and rules of conduct for transnational issues of international affairs, with the members of this structure assuming primary responsibility for maintaining the international economic and political order as well as international security and development. Above all, no such role was envisaged in the goals set by the countries which created this group in 2006, nor were the resources at their disposal sufficient to support one.

However, due to a variety of external and internal factors, the question of considering BRICS as a global governance institution, and promoting it as such, has now come to the fore.

First, the global governance deficit is critical, while the United States and many EU countries still want to maintain their rivalry with China and Russia and to reproduce a Cold War-like schism instead of working toward a common international order and jointly addressing common challenges. The activities of the main global governance institutions, such as the UN Security Council or the G20, have been almost completely obstructed. Furthermore, in the context of the US confrontation with China and Russia, unilateral sanctions and trade wars have become an enduring reality of international relations.

The meagre extent of state-to-state cooperation amid the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare how weak global governance has become. In most cases, the United States and the EU have been making decisions without any regard for their allies' interests. Instead they are looking out for themselves. The amount of help from less affected EU neighbours slightly increased only after Russia and China started providing support to the hardest hit European countries, but this was done for geopolitical rather than humanitarian reasons. Supranational and interstate institutions, starting with the UN Security Council and ending with the European Commission, almost completely disappeared from the media radar and were essentially uninvolved in the response to the worst pandemic of the last 100 years. Only in late March 2020 did the G20 host an online summit, and even that was more to assert its relevance than to actually do something to mitigate this global economic crisis.

COVID-19 has also exacerbated a number of international disputes and conflicts without, however, altering their underlying foundation. In particular, the United States has ratcheted up its confrontational policy towards China and Russia. The pandemic has become yet another stage for political rivalry, the tools of which (sanctions, trade and information wars, or the arms race) remain in good working order.

Weaker global governance and intensified global rivalry, as well as the battle for global leadership, have made coordinating foreign and economic policies a necessity for countries that already have become, or may in the future become targets of aggressive US policies. This is primarily true of Russia and China, but could potentially apply to India, Brazil and South Africa. The United States has made it clear that it can use sanctions against its allies, not to mention everyone else, prompting leading developing economies to reconsider their dependence on the US dollar

and the possibility of creating alternative financial and economic tools and development institutions.

Second, over the 10-plus years of its existence, BRICS has made great strides. Initially, it emerged as an association of major developing economies, but with South Africa, which ranks 25th in terms of GDP (PPP), joining it in 2011, such positioning became irrelevant. In exchange, the union became much more representative and global in geographical terms. But there was need to develop a new BRICS “identity.”

Third, it became hard not to notice that a significant number of the G20’s non-western members, who are not members of the G7, are BRICS members. The BRICS countries began to hold regular consultations in the run-up to or on the side-lines of almost all the G20 events – summits, ministerial meetings, sherpa meetings, and the like. This automatically made the Big Five a global governance mechanism for coordinating and harmonizing the member countries’ approaches to the global agenda items submitted at the G20.

Fourth, the BRICS countries have made significant progress recently toward developing a common position on the most important matters of the global economy, politics and security. Statements by the BRICS leaders adopted at the annual summits cover almost all main aspects of global governance and international security.

Fifth, the institutionalization of BRICS as a union has become markedly deeper. In 2015, the BRICS New Development Bank became operational, and Big Five political, economic and cultural consultations at various levels became regular. In fact, the “second track” mechanisms were created the day BRICS was formed. The Academic Forum was established in 2008; in 2013, in Durban, South Africa, the leaders approved the creation of special groups to coordinate business and expert activities (BRICS Business Council and BRICS Expert Centre Council). To put this into perspective, the G7 supported its early activities by working through international institutions established earlier under the leadership of the United States, such as the Bretton Woods system, the OECD and others. For a long time, the group was off-limits to the public. Only after the protester Carlo Giuliani was killed during an anti-globalist protest rally outside the group’s summit in Genoa in 2001, did the civil, expert and business community gain some prominence.

These five factors have made BRICS an important global governance institution, even if the founding nations did not have this in mind when creating it. After all, global governance is about multilateral cooperation on transnational problems which globalization creates or exacerbates and which cannot be solved unilaterally or through bilateral diplomacy. Today, this interaction accounts for a significant portion of the BRICS countries' agenda beyond the traditional cooperation between the five countries.

The position of BRICS as a global governance institution operating within the current context of global confrontation gives rise to comparisons to the most authoritative historical assembly of leading western countries – the Group of Seven. Especially now that the fleeting experiment with the G8 has ended, apparently for good, giving way to the G7's return, one may be tempted to look at BRICS as the non-western counterpart to the G7.

However, this comparison appears superficial. The G7 was originally created on the basis of shared values and interests during the Cold War between East and West. The main question for all the countries involved in it was, in fact, how to increase the collective West's chances to win, and then to prevent the erosion of western solidarity against the background of subsiding international tensions. The priority tasks included maintaining global control and dominance over the countries outside the wealthy consumer West and preventing the rise of new developing states and the formation of a new world order.

Following the end of the Cold War, the G7 allowed western countries to coordinate policies aimed at strengthening their dominance in global affairs and the global hegemony of the collective West, while transforming the rest of humanity so that it fits the mould of western interests and values which were touted as universal back then. One of the leading Russian experts of international affairs, Alexei Bogaturov, aptly called the G7 an institutional embodiment of “pluralistic unipolarity.”²

The members' homogeneity of values was maintained as well: Russia was admitted to the club in 1997 with the expectation that it would eventually become a “normal European country.” However, already in the second half of the 2000s, when Russia boldly refused to follow the western model and adopt western interests as its own, some started

²Bogaturov A.D. . “Pluralisticheskaya odnopolyarnost i interesy Rossii” (*Pluralistic unipolarity and Russia's interests*) // *Svobodnaya Mysl*, 1996, No. 2.

saying that its continued G7 membership was inappropriate. The US presidential candidate from the Republican Party in 2008, Senator John McCain, was among those calling for Russia's expulsion from the club. In 2014, when western countries finally decided to continue on as seven, without Russia, the club's values and politics become homogenous once again. Today, the G7 is used by the leading western countries to strengthen their position in competition with the non-western centres and to restore their global leadership. When the G7 countries talk about the need to maintain or restore a "rules-based international order," the a priori assumption is that they will be the ones to draft these rules.

Unlike the G7, BRICS is based on entirely different values, and adheres to the goals and objectives of the UN Charter and the idea of equality. Members of the association include countries with different political systems. They do not seek to impose homogenous values on the rest of the world, but, on the contrary, advocate civilizational and political diversity and a diversity of values. BRICS a priori does not offer third countries a universal development model or ready-made recipes for reform, but insists that each country form its own development model.

Although neither club is seeking to expand its membership, the fundamental difference in their approaches to engagement with the rest of the world is worth noting. The G7 outreach formats routinely had the feeling of a gracious handout by the good masters teaching a lesson to their lazy vassals. Countries that do not share the western outlook on the world or its values and do not accept US hegemony are not allowed to join the G7. BRICS does not claim exclusivity and does not position itself as a "global government," but rather steadily builds on its work with third countries – not to push them in a certain direction, but in order to jointly secure their common interests. There is no teacher-student dynamic here.

BRICS is free of the kind of hegemony that is the primary feature of the G7 inherited from the Cold War. Without the United States, the G7's global role and value would be infinitesimal. The G7 is currently paralyzed as the Trump administration prefers to pursue self-serving policies and scorns most of the collective West's traditional approaches to global governance, while the rest of its members are eagerly awaiting a new administration in Washington and a return to the US policy of "benevolent hegemony." In BRICS, each country has its own strengths and brings something different to the table. China is this association's largest economy, for example, while

Russia enjoys nuclear parity with the United States. But none of these countries seek hegemony over the other Big Five members, or anyone else for that matter.

In addition, unlike the G7, which was created to give the western bloc a competitive edge in the Cold War and identify opportunities to make the world western-centric again, BRICS, by bringing together non-western developing economies, is not positioning itself as a competitor to the G7. The BRICS countries have very different relations with the different G7 countries ranging from partnerships (India) to confrontation (Russia and China), so attempts to create an opposition would stoke internal division within the Big Five. Of course, the goal of a fairer world order shared by the BRICS countries implies resistance to the collective West's residual hegemonic tendencies and the restoration of its economic and political leadership in the world. What's more, the Big Five do this while relying on a unifying agenda and cooperation, rather than a bloc-based approach. Most importantly, BRICS is in no way seeking to take the place of the G7 in regulating international affairs. The question of eventually becoming the decision-making centre for the most important global economic and political issues, a sort of "global government", is never raised in BRICS, as it would be completely at odds with their commitment to the idea of a fair polycentric world order without a global hegemon, individual or collective.

Despite their increased influence, most of the BRICS members consider themselves developing economies that have yet to overcome numerous developmental challenges, and are therefore not ready to assume responsibility for the entire world or provide humanity with public goods. Of course, the association is striving to get there, but conceiving of itself as a centre of global governance, much less assuming greater commitments, will take time. Furthermore, the BRICS countries are not ready to emulate the West's approach to global governance which consists of transforming and guiding the rest. As they take their first steps as globally significant nations (or the first steps after a long break), the BRICS countries do not have the strategic vision found among the G7 members and often choose to avoid the risks involved in tackling truly global matters.

So, where should BRICS be headed now that it has gone beyond basic dialogue among the five nations? While not planning to become a non-western replica of the G7, BRICS is gradually becoming a global governance centre, and such questions must be considered.

Member Approaches to the Future of BRICS

Russia

Russia can be rightfully considered the initiator of BRICS insofar as the very first BRIC meeting took place during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum held in June 2006 at the level of ministers of economy, and the first summit took place in Yekaterinburg in June 2009. The creation and further expansion of the association was an important diplomatic success for Moscow. To this day, Russia remains one of the group's most active members and considers BRICS an important area of its foreign policy.

This is no coincidence. Russia was the first among the non-western centres of power to openly discuss multipolarity and to promote it enthusiastically, without being concerned about the inevitable fallout in relations with the West. Multipolarity became Russia's official foreign policy doctrine back in the mid-1990s, when then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov endeavoured to form the Russia-China-India triangle, currently known as the RIC format. Since the mid-2000s, Russia has sought to make multipolarity a practical reality.

In addition, compared to other BRICS countries, Russia possesses the most advanced strategic culture and a strong tradition of great power politics. Russia is accustomed to identifying itself as a centre of power of global importance and believes it is entitled to take part in building and managing the international order and making major decisions. Therefore, more than other non-western players, it is preoccupied with the international order and its place therein. It resists western attempts to consolidate the world order based on its rules, values and leadership more energetically and openly than other non-western powers. Finally, as a country steeped in European culture, Russia tends to institutionalize, albeit informally, developments in international affairs that redound to its benefit.

In Russia's view, the role of BRICS in promoting Russia's national interests and strengthening its status as a great power, as well as in forming a more

equitable international order that has no place for global hegemony of any kind, are inextricably linked. In a polycentric order, Moscow's chances of becoming one of the full-fledged centres of power and a player in the big league of global politics are quite good.

BRICS' international activity and the very fact of being part of this association automatically gives Russia (and other countries of the Big Five as well) more international weight. It emphasizes Russia's membership in a group of the most influential non-western countries, whose multilateral interaction is guaranteed to attract the attention of the entire world and raise the individual profile of each participant.

In addition, Moscow considers BRICS a symbol of a less western-centric form of global governance and the embodiment of the "post-West world" (a world without the hegemony of the West), and an avenue to accelerate the formation of a more equitable polycentric order, in which Moscow would be a big league player. Opposing the West's attempts to assert its hegemony on a global scale, which automatically reduced Moscow's role to junior partner at best, has remained one of Russia's top foreign policy priorities since the mid-1990s. BRICS is proof that these efforts were not in vain, and strategically Russia is on the right side of history.

Cooperation within BRICS allows Russia to promote the kind of principles for a world order that it stands to benefit from, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, consideration of the interests of fellow great powers, respect for civilizational diversity, and multilateral decision-making, where such decisions are supported by other Big Five members. By adhering to these principles themselves, the BRICS countries are able to more effectively oppose the policies of western countries that run contrary to them.

Participation in BRICS allows Russia to consolidate its identity as a country that is part of the non-western world. This has become particularly important for Moscow since 2014, when relations with the collective West descended into confrontation, and the question of returning to the western political and foreign policy orbit was taken off the table indefinitely, if not permanently. BRICS offered proof that even after falling out with the West, Russia didn't drop out of the international community and, more than that, feels comfortable where it belongs.

The BRICS countries are Russia's major economic partners. Like China, Russia has become the target of western sanctions, which are unlikely to be lifted any time soon, with chances approaching zero in the case of the US-imposed sanctions. So, cooperation within BRICS matters a lot for Russia in terms of mitigating the sanctions' impact.

Creating a new infrastructure of international finance and international economic relations that is not controlled by the West is the best way to minimize the effect of sanctions as well as western countries' eagerness to use them. Reducing the US dollar's role in international trade and forming new development institutions that are not dependent on the West are priorities for BRICS.

The Big Five also offers a way for Russia to advance rules of conduct in the security sphere. These rules matter to Russia and the world in general, and they are unlikely to be developed in conjunction with the United States and NATO countries either through the Russia-West dialogue or China-West interaction. Adopting such rules at the BRICS level and jointly promoting them in a more global context (the UN) increases Russia and other association members' authority and incentivizes the West to enter into dialogue.

China

China's interest in BRICS traditionally has been similar to Russia's and stems from a desire to reformat the global governance system and to boost its role in international politics. Until recently, Beijing thought of BRICS as a tool to achieve its medium-term goals. However, the deepening confrontation with the United States since 2017 has taken on a systemic and probably long-term character, which has altered China's approach to BRICS. Increased US pressure across all strategic areas and the retreat to protectionism have increased the importance of this group for China.

As the "world's factory" for decades now, China is extremely interested in cooperating with association members. For Beijing, they represent major trading partners. China imports their raw materials and exports manufactured goods while also expanding investments. In addition, China is cooperating with Russia in research and technology (to a lesser extent with Brazil and South Africa).

Beijing's growing interest in cooperation with Russian technical universities and research centres is palpable. This process is driven by the need for various research and engineering schools to share knowledge and technology, and the vanishing opportunities for China to place its research groups in western countries. This practice will likely extend to other BRICS countries with significant research capacity.

In the face of a US trade war, China is using every opportunity, including BRICS, to promote globalization and free trade and to condemn economic protectionism. Here, the goals of China's major Belt and Road project coincide with the BRICS New Development Bank's priorities, especially in terms of expanding infrastructure.

It appears reasonable for Beijing to use BRICS to minimize the risk of restrictions on Chinese businesses in the BRICS countries, including with respect to technical standards. In this regard, preventing additional restrictions on China's technology giants, such as the ones imposed on Huawei, is high on the list of China's priorities when it comes to BRICS. China's relations with Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, which have gone from tough anti-Chinese rhetoric to constructive cooperation, are a case of China's productive use of the BRICS mechanisms in this area.

Despite the US-China confrontation and its ramifications for the global economy, the trade war between them could open additional windows of growth to BRICS. As the countries swapped trade restrictions recently, predictions of the impending diversification of Chinese imports began to appear. China was expected to increase purchases primarily of agricultural produce on alternative markets, such as Brazil, Russia and other countries. Even though the trade war between the United States and China has been put on hold, the era of global confrontation between them is just getting started, so this opportunity will likely present itself somewhere down the road.

China's interest in BRICS is on the rise due to practical considerations of maintaining constructive relations with its trading partners and the need to build friendly international relations amid a protracted face-off with the United States. Adapting China's foreign policy to the ever-changing landscape of international politics relies, in many ways, on the five-sided BRICS format.

India

The main reason behind India's interest and membership in BRICS is a desire to become a great power. It has an idiosyncratic view of the Group of Five as a way to break out of the "wheel of samsara" in its relations with Pakistan and to reach the same level as China, which is the key regional power. This makes BRICS more attractive to New Delhi than the SCO, in which it has the same formal status as Islamabad. China is becoming an increasingly determinative, if not dominant, factor in India's foreign policy.

On the one hand, the India-China rivalry poses certain risks to BRICS, as it adds to tensions between members and limits the range of issues on which they can find a common denominator. For this reason, it would be better to leave "hard" security matters off the BRICS agenda entirely. On the other hand, the rivalry is unlikely to reduce New Delhi's interest in BRICS or force it to leave the association. This would contradict one of the core principles of India's foreign policy which is independence and non-alignment. Once out of BRICS, India would basically find itself in the position of junior partner to the US and significantly limit its own room to manoeuvre in foreign policy. Since BRICS is not a military alliance or a closed-off integration association, it is the best format for India to embody its principle of non-alignment.

India shares BRICS' unified commitment to a multipolar world, a fair international order, civilizational diversity, and a stronger role for developing countries in global governance and critical decisions. The country's leadership also understands that the five-sided format is a way to boost foreign trade, maintain useful relations with other countries of the association, and gain leverage in its dialogue with the West.

Now India is trying to find a balance between the United States and China in their global face-off, which will guarantee the country's position as an independent great power. In this context, India is vehemently opposed to the idea of making the BRICS an anti-western or anti-American bloc which fully coincides with Brazil and South Africa's approach. However, despite their confrontational relations with the United States, China and Russia would not welcome such an evolution of BRICS either, as their goal is to prevent the world from polarizing into blocs.

Strengthening friendly ties with other BRICS members is India's top priority, and its areas of focus within the Big Five include economic and financial cooperation (New Development Bank), counter-terrorism and climate change.

Brazil

Brazil sees its participation in BRICS as a way to strengthen its international positions and gradually become a global power. To be sure, these ambitions are grounded in reality: Brazil has the demographic, territorial, geographical and resource potential. However, historically, these ambitions have come into conflict with the interests of the United States, which has viewed the Latin American giant as a rival in its quest for leadership of the Western Hemisphere. In many ways, the US view of Brazil as a threat to its regional dominance determined the course of bilateral relations throughout the 20th century, and their echo still reverberates through modern politics. Competition with the United States in Latin America has also heightened Brazil's interest in BRICS.

At the tactical level, though, Brazil's approaches to association are largely determined by the dynamics of its internal political developments. During the period of left-wing dominance in Brazilian politics, BRICS was the key to the country's leadership strategy in the Global South. The Big Five was mostly regarded as a commonwealth of civilizations, and at the time Brazil spoke in favour of Muslim countries joining the format as well. Jair Bolsonaro, known for his eccentric views, won the presidential election in late 2018, offering new hope to BRICS sceptics. Indeed, he campaigned in ways that echoed Donald Trump's right-wing populist brand of politics, calling for greater national sovereignty and limits on Chinese business.

However, confronted with complex international realities, not only the government bureaucracy, but the country's new leadership quickly came to realize the benefits of using the five-sided format. Strategic considerations clearly prevailed. Despite Jair Bolsonaro's ideological and stylistic proximity to Donald Trump, relations between the two countries have not been without controversy, from swapping barbs to swapping customs restrictions. Brazil's hopes that the United States would become its main trading partner fizzled. Given the circumstances, Bolsonaro had to soften his stance on China. Brazil has since reaffirmed past agreements, as evidenced by the high-level dialogue among the participants during Brazil's BRICS chairmanship in 2019. The opening of the New Development Bank's Brazilian headquarters was a significant shared achievement.

Brazil's interest in BRICS and consolidating the Big Five will most likely increase in the future. The centre of gravity among elites has shifted towards the military wing, which may play a positive role in shaping

joint international security decisions. In addition, a significant faction of the national security establishment sees China as a strategic partner rather than a threat, which serves to strengthen relations between the Big Five members.

Cooperation between Brazil and China is on the rise. China's investment in Brazil's oil industry is growing, and there have been positive developments in technological and political cooperation. Like Russia, China helped Brazil deal with the aftermath of the Amazon wildfires in 2019. In turn, Brazil is showing solidarity with China in its fight against protectionism and trade restrictions. BRICS seems to be an important tool for Brazil as it strives to overcome an isolationist trend, especially given its strained relations with the United States, the EU and its regional neighbours.

South Africa

Unlike Brazil or India, the Republic of South Africa does not exhibit a strongly pronounced desire to acquire the status of global great power, although it attempts to speak on behalf of the entire African continent on the side-lines of BRICS meetings. South Africa's activity in the association is primarily geared toward achieving practical results. BRICS is seen by South Africa as a means of pursuing specific domestic priorities rather than a platform for addressing urgent international challenges, and so its interests lie in financial and economic innovations, loans from the BRICS New Development Bank and expanding the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, which would facilitate major investment projects.

Significant factors benefitting BRICS include the relatively stable domestic political and economic situation in South Africa compared to earlier periods. On the other hand, the African ethnocultural emphasis in South Africa's domestic political discourse makes effective dialogue more difficult.

The marginalization of South Africa's intellectual elite is another important aspect that could potentially weigh BRICS down. Analytical support for the country's foreign policy suffers as a result, and the expert community relies on ineffective western clichés

The BRICS Agenda in an Evolving Global Context

The evolution of the global context, or the main trends in international relations, exerts a major impact on BRICS and its prospects. The US confrontation with China and Russia is the first such trend, which is systemic and will most likely last a while. Global leadership, technological superiority and the nature of the future world order are at stake.

The United States is desperately looking for modalities in its relations with the rest of the world. Clearly, US global hegemony is not possible, but American history, ideology and foreign policy inertia prevent the country from making the switch to treating other centres of power as equals and forming an international order jointly with them. So far, the search for modalities has consisted of a confrontational policy toward those who have defied US leadership. To quote Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the 2020 Munich Security Conference, the purpose of this policy is “winning”, as the United States and the collective West won in 1989–1991.

This means more conflict and rivalry across the world, continued sanctions and trade wars against China and Russia, which have become the new normal in international relations, as well as the “crumbling” of rules, institutions and international security and global governance arrangements.

Relations between the United States and China are becoming the main axis of international politics of the first half of the 21st century, which raises the question of the role of other BRICS countries in the international system’s new global configuration.

For BRICS, this layout creates, above all, the risk of an internal split. The United States is already trying to drag India into a confrontation with China, and over time it will do the same to Brazil and South Africa.

Technology will be a battlefield dominated by two main platforms, American and Chinese. If, for example, a BRICS country opts for the US platform

and imposes restrictions on Chinese manufacturers, China's response will be swift and extremely painful.

Values and ideology are some of the other sources of tension along the United States-China and the United States-Russia axes. Washington immediately grafted today's rivalry with China and Russia onto the ideological matrix which has been known since the Cold War, portraying it as a confrontation between the "free world" (under US patronage) and "authoritarian revisionists." This has the potential to divide BRICS into two camps as well.

Another trend in international relations is their genuine democratization and decentralization. The role of small, medium and regional players is on the rise everywhere. They refuse to live under the patronage of global powerhouses and seek independence and autonomy in international affairs. These include, primarily, the G20 members, which are not part of the G7 or BRICS, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Indonesia, as well as Vietnam, Egypt and several other countries. The regional players' greater focus on independence and foreign policy autonomy renders global governance by exclusive clubs impossible at the level of the respective regions.

Climate change and environmental degradation in developed and developing economies rounds out the list of the key trends transforming the global context. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, which upended the world in 2020, many believed the threat of a pandemic was second only to war. COVID-19 showed that transnational factors pose a much greater threat to people's lives and economic welfare than great power rivalry for influence and power.

Coronavirus has joined environmental degradation and climate change as a global challenge to humankind. Perhaps in the future it will inspire a rethink of the philosophy of development and perceptions of security threats. A development model with more of a focus on public goods may become more attractive than a race for quantitative growth numbers.

However, despite the serious nature of the threat, the pandemic has not only done nothing to reverse the above trends, it has dramatically reinforced them, in fact. In the short term, we will see weakened multilateral institutions and global governance giving way to action at the national level, increased competition between the United States and China, and a deepening economic crisis. Due to the global spread of the pandemic, it

will hit the vast majority of countries. Many sectors of the economy will face the threat of widespread bankruptcies. Unemployment will increase, and the subsequent strain on social assistance programs will cause financial instability. The likely collapse of the Eurozone and the possible exit of several Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain, plunging them into an economic crisis comparable to the aftermath of a war, will be the most palpable blow to the global economy.

There's good news, though. The long-term outlook for the world is more positive. The global economy will go through a restructuring, globalization will undergo major changes, and demand for cooperation on healthcare, environmental protection and climate will grow. All this will only serve to underscore the importance of redoubling cooperation within BRICS.

BRICS Development Paths

In a world where unilateral action is becoming more prevalent, the number of conflicts is growing, and many institutions and forums are paralyzed, BRICS may well meet the demand for multilateralism and global governance. It should openly position itself as a global governance institution, which does not seek to weaken anyone or to take anyone's place, but to fill the global governance void. The BRICS agenda should focus on more than relations between the five nations. It should be a dialogue of five countries about the world.

Furthermore, the BRICS countries should not get drawn into the US-China or US-Russia confrontation under any circumstances. The agenda should be unifying, not divisive. It is worth noting that cooperation between different BRICS members is going at different speeds: Russia-China cooperation far exceeds relations between other member countries.

The new global crisis has made expanding economic cooperation between the BRICS countries even more salient. It is imperative to speed up the development of innovative financial tools to blunt the effectiveness and damage caused by US sanctions, as well as to reduce the US dollar's significance in favour of national currencies in trade between them and with the third countries.

The coronavirus outbreak has shone a spotlight on the importance of the BRICS countries' cooperation in tackling key challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change and pandemics. Due to their global nature, it is not ideal or even possible to address these challenges as a group of just five countries. Other countries must be part of the effort.

Finally, in light of the above, greater cooperation with countries as part of the BRICS+ format and expanded partnerships should be among BRICS' top priorities in the years to come.

BRICS+ should maintain a dialogue with the countries that are most committed to the goal of forming a polycentric world order, pursue an independent policy and can help solve specific global and regional problems. Above all, this includes non-western G20 members (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Indonesia, South Korea, Mexico and Argentina). However, the effort should not be limited to these countries. BRICS is open to partnership when it comes to promoting ideas or achieving the goals of universal well-being. As long as the full-fledged expansion of BRICS remains impractical, it is imperative to be in constant dialogue with non-western countries that share the strategic views of the Big Five.

The new enhanced BRICS+ should prioritize fighting climate change and environmental degradation, protecting biodiversity, preventing pandemics and dealing with their aftereffects, reducing the use of the US dollar in trade in favour of national currencies and defending against unilateral restrictive measures in general, as well as creating additional incentives for revitalizing the global economy, promoting the stability of global energy markets and encouraging cross-cultural and inter-civilizational contacts.

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