



Do the BRICS Still Matter?

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FOREWORD

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Foreword

This study addresses the future of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the members' social, political, economic, and diplomatic disparities, and how these differences could prevent the BRICS from proving a coherent and effective strategic alliance. The analysis of the group's common features and differences, strategic culture, and foreign policy suggests that despite their potential, the BRICS are not likely to deliver a new international system.

The BRICS made headlines throughout the 2000s, as the member states experienced a significant economic boom. Their growing economic (and thus geopolitical) relevance motivated the five to work more closely together, largely in an effort to shift influence away from the Group of 7 (G7) developed economies toward the developing world. But more recently, Russian military escalation in Syria and the crisis afflicting many emerging market economies have called into question the growth model of the BRICS nations. Though the impact of China's economic slowdown and financial turmoil on the global economy is not yet clear, the same cannot be said for its repercussions for the developing world—including China's fellow BRICS.

Ultimately, this all points to an alarming reality: the foundation of the BRICS concept is beginning to crumble. So are the members strong enough to absorb this blow? And even if the individual members emerge intact, can the BRICS remain viable?

Despite the efforts to create an institutional framework that facilitates cooperation among the BRICS—through, for example, the launch of the New Development Bank and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement—the grouping remains primarily rhetorical, not concrete. And the lack of tangible achievements bodes ill for the group's long-term survival.

Conflicting interests and the indisputable political, social, and cultural differences among the group's members have kept the BRICS from translating their economic force into collective political power on the global stage. And with economic prospects decreasingly promising, the notion of the BRICS as a political project seems too fragile to stand on its own. As the economic crisis develops, these contradictions will likely become still more apparent, exposing the inconsistencies and lack of cohesion that characterize the group's positions. Even as the BRICS claim to advocate for a new global system, for example, the biggest obstacles to United Nations Security Council reform remain China and Russia—themselves both BRICS members.

Each of the group's members faces a distinct domestic reality, as well—realities that can variably bolster and hinder the priorities of the BRICS.

As a Latin America expert, I've focused primarily on the case of Brazil and its government's efforts to tackle pressing domestic issues, which has become the country's number-one priority. The economy is in recession, Brazilians are engaged in protests all

across the country, and the political elite seem closer every day to facing the widespread corruption that has long plagued the Brazilian system. Entangled in a debilitating political and economic crisis that has damaged public confidence at home and credibility abroad, Brazil seems stuck in a quagmire with no end in sight. But as discouraging as the current scenario appears, it also provides the country with an opportunity to reassess its priorities and implement the reforms it has long needed. How Brazil faces its current situation will prove a deciding factor in the country's future. And only by setting realistic and pragmatic goals can the country get itself back on track.

Brazil has put a lot of effort into building and bolstering the BRICS—and into selling the idea that the group is a viable alternative to the global system. But the group seems increasingly like a sinking ship, even as other global economies continue to recover and grow.

All signs, it seems, point to Washington. The United States and Brazil have shared a largely productive partnership for decades. They share common values and overlapping histories, and they are the biggest countries by far in the Western Hemisphere. They are natural partners, and they are historic ones. Strengthening that bilateral relationship—even at the expense of the BRICS—could prove vital to restoring Brazil's economic vigor and to advancing its interests in the international arena. But sticking with the BRICS will do neither.

The potential when the two vibrant, multiethnic democracies cooperate is inestimable—domestically, regionally, and globally. U.S.-Brazil ties are a sure bet—and a far cry from the BRICS, which, after several false starts, may never take off.

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Do the BRICS Still Matter?

Marcos Degaut

Introduction

Not many concepts have done more to muddle strategic and academic thinking about the global economy and international politics in the last decade than that of the BRICS. The term was initially coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill, then-chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, in a paper titled “Building Better Global Economic BRICs,” as an acronym for the rising global economic power of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, the rapidly emerging countries that would be the “strategic pillars” of a renewed international system by 2050.

Since then, the term has also been used without much consistency as a symbol to designate the hopes of a shift in global economic power away from the G7 developed economies toward the developing world. Atale (2012:16) argues that “[T]he BRICs concept has just reinforced the fact that investors of all sorts use it as acronym for all emerging markets.” Ünay (2013:83) contended that the term, “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.” To Pant (2013:92), “[T]he term ‘BRICs’ soon became a brand, a near ubiquitous financial term, shaping how a generation of investors, financiers and policymakers view the emerging markets.”

Actually, many international politics analysts have held in recent years that the economic rise of the BRICS might herald a major shift in global power. The message being forwarded is that the American moment is coming to an end and power will be no more concentrated in Washington. Rather, a new global balance would emerge, based not upon American hegemony, but on the distribution of power among several different countries, in a context where the BRICS would assume their place as great powers. The United States would continue to keep a prominent position, but the international system would revolve no longer around a U.S.-centric basis.

O’Neill’s central idea concerned merely the individual economic trajectory of four rapidly expanding emerging countries grouped by common features. It was not intended to create an analytical category or imply any formal diplomatic alliance or strategic articulation among these countries. However, their impressive economic performance, fueled by expanding domestic markets, and their more independent and assertive foreign policy made the term BRICs to become globally known. Pant (2013) contends that it did not take much time for these countries to realize the importance of taking advantage of the opportunity to promote their political interests and change global perceptions about them, using it to structure a new group to highlight their growing weight in global politics and economics.

As a matter of fact, BRICs countries' economic evolution during the first decade of the twenty-first century—when their combined growth rate represented nearly 60 percent of the global growth rate¹—seemed to indicate their emergence as relevant actors on the world stage. The data presented in Table 1 show that the relative resistance to the effects of the world economic crisis of 2001 (the Asian Crisis), which severely hit the most developed countries, suggested that this group was about to play an entirely new leading role in the world economy. Their figures were even more impressive when compared to the poor economic performance of the nations that make up the G7.

Table 1. G7 Countries and BRICs GDP Annual Growth Rates in Percent, 2003–2008

Country		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
BRICs	Brazil	1.1	5.7	3.2	4.0	6.1	5.2
	Russia	7.3	7.2	6.4	8.2	8.5	5.2
	India	7.9	7.8	9.3	9.3	9.8	3.9
	China	10	10.1	11.3	12.7	14.2	9.6
G7	Canada	1.9	3.1	3.0	2.8	2.2	0.7
	France	0.9	2.5	1.8	2.5	2.3	-0.1
	Germany	-0.4	1.2	0.7	3.7	3.3	1.1
	Italy	-0.1	1.7	0.9	2.2	1.7	-1.2
	Japan	1.7	2.4	1.3	1.7	2.2	-1.0
	United Kingdom	3.8	2.9	2.8	2.6	3.6	-1.0
	United States	2.6	3.5	3.1	2.7	1.9	-0.4

Source: World Bank, “Data: GDP growth (annual %),” <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>.

It appeared that in a world marked by financial instability, economic uncertainties, and poor growth in the most developed countries, the BRICs would have a “remarkable opportunity to coordinate their economic policies and diplomatic strategy not only to enhance their position as a grouping in the international economic and financial system, but also to be a stabilization factor in the world economy as a whole” (Pant 2013:93). However, it was only after a series of informal parallel meetings held on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly 61st session, in 2006, that officials of those countries, driven by dreams of becoming the new superpowers that would help shape a new international system, agreed to effectively set the stage for global collective action. What was then a mere ideational construct began to be transformed into a diplomatic forum founded on the shared perception that, due to their political, economic, historical, and diplomatic heft, those nations had more in common than merely demographic and economic features, especially their belief in an inalienable right to play a more influential

¹ Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3672&catid=159&Itemid=436&lang=pt-BR.

role in world affairs (Hurrel 2009). As the spearhead of developing countries, the BRICs would speak on behalf of them in the main international forums, advocating a more legitimate, representative, and symmetrical international order.

The first formal summit meeting of the BRICs was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in July 2009, in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Amid mutual promises of political convergence and harmonization of conflicts of interests, those countries issued a vague joint communiqué expressing their concerns about the world economy and committing to undertake the necessary efforts to reform the global economic governance system, objectives that remained largely in the realm of rhetoric.

After six summit meetings and the incorporation of South Africa as the “S” of the acronym in April 2011, the mechanism has made little progress toward building a collective identity or an institutional apparatus. It has also failed to set up a strategic agenda, with concrete propositions and actions, or a new conceptual framework for trade negotiations. Beyond diplomatic rhetoric, the BRICS have not proved a very useful instrument for pursuing foreign policy objectives and interests.

The purpose of this study is to provide a critical account of the BRICS as an analytical category, examining some of its constitutive dimensions, with a main focus on the political and economic relations among its members, within the context of current debates on paradigm shifts in the global political economy. The objective is to examine whether the possibilities of an effective multilateral intra-group cooperation are real and whether this multilateral cooperation could lead to a major change in world power distribution.

The first section examines some of the common features shared by the BRICS and their differences. It puts into perspective their relative weaknesses and strengths and tries to explain to what extent they affect their mutual relations and their relations with other actors. The second section analyzes whether, how, and why these countries have cooperated in the main international forums. The third section examines the countries’ strategic cultures and how those contribute to mold political thoughts and behaviors that shape their foreign policies, in order to see if some form of collective action can really be part of their political repertoire. That section also analyzes each country’s individual motivations for joining the BRICS. The study concludes by arguing that social disparities, diplomatic divergences, and political and economic differences between the BRICS will likely prevent them from forming a coherent, effective, and consolidated strategic alliance that goes beyond a narrow set of shared beliefs and objectives.

The BRICS and Their (Dis)similarities

O’Neill envisaged the BRICS as the future engine of global growth, a view shared by a significant part of the mainstream economics literature. Those countries were expected to create and sustain economic miracles and lead the world toward a new economic and political paradigm. This association of emerging powers—though scholars are not certain whether they should consider Russia an “emerging power”—was conceptually based upon the existence of some common features. First, they are all large in terms of both size and

population, with large and rapidly expanding domestic markets and an untapped labor reservoir. Second, they have displayed impressive growth figures over the course of the last decade at least and have a great manufacturing potential. Brazil, Russia, India, and China are among the 10 largest economies in the world, ranking 6th, 8th, 10th, and 2nd, respectively in December 2013.² Third, they are largely the most important countries in their respective regions. And finally, they are all “undergoing a military modernization effort aimed at preserving their strategic interests” (Darling 2010).

However, the BRICS also share some negative common characteristics, to which much less attention has been paid. As developing countries, they have to urgently overcome structural issues that contribute to undermine their economic potential. Broadly speaking, they all have been exposed, at different levels, to endemic corruption, high rates of illiteracy, poverty, regional income and economic inequalities, overexposure to commodities and dependence on commodities exports, dependence on foreign direct investments, vulnerability to asset bubbles, poor institutional and regulatory quality, and a relatively small opening to the global economy. However, since these characteristics can usually be attributed to most developing countries, they cannot be considered defining features of the BRICS.

It could be said that these countries have never had much in common, which is not surprising given their extreme disparities. To Bremmer (2013:180), “it has become all too clear that the acronym no longer holds water because these four countries are so dramatically different on virtually every metric.” It really seems to be about a fragile community of specific interests made up of countries with huge and almost insurmountable differences regarding economic and structural issues, production endowment, development models, political settings and traditions, public policies, social formations, military capabilities, and developmental challenges, as well as radically distinct conceptions about the role of the state and life in society. These issues, coupled with their distinct foreign policy priorities, severely limit possibilities for collective action.

Sharma (2012) argues that the problem with thinking in acronyms is that once one catches on, it tends to lock analysts into a worldview that may soon be outdated. This might already be the case with the BRICS, despite its short lifespan. From an economic standpoint, the initial hype and euphoria with which the BRICS was received is no longer valid today. There is not a single reliable indicator supporting the claims that this group of countries tends to become and remain the locomotive of global economic growth in the next years, as evidenced by their decreasing GDP growth rates (Table 2).

² Sam Ro, “The 40 Biggest Economies in the World,” *Business Insider*, June 15, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/largest-economies-world-gdp-2013-6>.

Table 2. BRICS GDP Annual Growth Rates in Percent, 2009–2013

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Brazil	-0.3	7.5	2.7	0.9	2.3
Russia	-7.8	4.5	4.3	3.4	1.5
India	8.5	10.5	6.3	6.2	4.4
China	9.2	10.4	9.3	7.8	7.7
South Africa	-1.5	3.1	3.5	2.5	1.8

Source: World Bank, “Data: GDP growth (annual %),” <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>.

China is already a global economic power, with great impact upon world trade; however, its annual GDP growth rate has fallen from 12 percent in the last 20 years to 7.7 in 2013, and to 6.9 percent in 2014,³ numbers still excellent, though not to Chinese standards. It reveals a soft-landing strategy needed to shift the dynamic axis on which the Chinese economy turns. This planned slowdown is intended to move the country away from a credit-backed growth model to a more sustained economy, promoting measures to foster domestic demand, in order to lift large contingents of people out of extreme poverty, and placing higher emphasis on value-added exports, while reducing its dependence on international markets.

These are not good news to a globalized world economy that has been struggling for over four years to overcome another crisis. It also represents a serious blow to countries like Brazil, which set their hopes in China as an engine of growth recovery. Not only Brazil, but the rest of the world will have to recalibrate and learn to deal with a new China. As the country’s growth has slowed, so has its demand for commodities and other key products. The World Bank estimates, for example, that an annual GDP growth rate in China around 8 percent can reduce Brazilian potential economic growth as much as 10 percent.

Brazil’s GDP growth has also experienced a downward trend. After averaging 4.5 percent between 2005 and 2010, the country registered rates as low as 0.9 percent in 2012, 0.3 percent in 2014,⁴ and an estimated negative growth of 1.9 percent in 2015.⁵ The country’s GDP grew by an average 3.6 percent between 2000 and 2011, far behind China (10.2 percent) and Russia (5.3 percent). These modest numbers are much below the country’s needs and too little for a country that aims to rewrite the “economic geography” of the world, as former President Lula da Silva (2003–2010) used to say.

It is known that the Brazilian industrial sector suffers from lack of competitiveness, yet there are virtually no signs of a coherent and systematic national industrial policy. On the contrary, what can be seen is a host of diffuse and disconnected measures, which are sometimes contradictory and very often poorly elaborated. The country’s infrastructures

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brazilian Central Bank, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2015/update/01/>.

⁵ Trading Economics, “Brasil—Taxa de Crescimento de PIB,” <http://pt.tradingeconomics.com/brazil/gdp-growth>.

are still highly deficient. The quality of roads, port, air, and rail infrastructures is very poor. Brazil ranks only 107 out of 144 countries in an infrastructure ranking, according to the World Economic Forum.⁶ Without industrial dynamism, Brazil is still largely dependent on commodities exports. As a consequence, the country ranked only 24 among the world's largest exporters, with a modest share in world total exports of 1.32 percent (US\$242 billion), much below China, the world's main exporter with a share of 11.13 percent (US\$2.05 trillion).⁷

After running a trade surplus for much of the past decade, thanks to strong demand for its commodities from China, Brazil is once again starting to buy more than it sells abroad and ran a trade deficit in 2014.⁸ The country's increasing reliance on protectionist measures has also contributed to substantially impede growth, and it concerns investors to such an extent that the International Chamber of Commerce ranked Brazil 70th out of 75 countries for openness to trade, foreign direct investment, and infrastructure competitiveness.⁹ In the 2014 Index of Economic Freedom, a ranking designed by The Heritage Foundation, Brazil ranks only 118 out of 178 countries, which is certainly not good news, as some argue that economic freedom can exert a positive impact upon investment levels, entrepreneurial business activity, economic growth, and per capita income.¹⁰

The increasing importance of China as leading investor and trading partner to Brazil since 2009 has not been a process without tensions between the two countries. The main concern is about the “deindustrialization” of the Brazilian economy. Due mainly to China's imports, primary products have come to make up an increasing share of Brazil's export, “revoking the effect of two decades of sustained efforts to strengthen the manufacturing and high tech export industry” (Bull and Kasahara 2011:1). Likewise, the Brazilian manufacturing sector has found out that low-priced Chinese imports are an unwelcome source of competition, and is now extremely worried about how to compete directly against the Chinese invasion of manufactured goods. For example, a survey published in February 2011 by the Brazilian National Confederation of Industry (CNI 2011) revealed that 45 percent of Brazilian firms that face competition from Chinese products had lost domestic market shares, while nearly 67 percent of Brazilian exporters had lost market shares abroad to their Chinese counterparts between 2006 and 2010 (Bull and Kasahara 2011).

Pereira and Castro Neves (2011) contend that the weakening of Brazilian manufacturing has led to a trade relationship with China best depicted as a “North-South” exchange, in which Brazil exports commodities to China and receives manufactured goods in return,

⁶ Rémy Carasse and Yves Zlotowski, “Brazil's Economy: Worrying Weaknesses?,” Coface Group, July 15, 2013, <http://www.coface.com/News-Publications/Publications/Brazil-s-economy-Worrying-weaknesses>.

⁷ World Trade Organization, “Members and Observers,” http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm.

⁸ Trading Economics, “Brazil Balance of Trade, 1959–2015,” <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/brazil/balance-of-trade>.

⁹ International Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.iccwbo.org/global-influence/g20/reports-and-products/open-markets-index/>.

¹⁰ Heritage Foundation, “2015 Index of Economic Freedom: Country Rankings,” <http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>.

rather than a more equitable “South-South” exchange. As a result, the Brazilian economy has become more and more dependent on the Chinese appetite for its primary goods.

In Russia, the challenge is to reduce the economy’s dependence on oil, so that the country can grow in a sustained manner. Holding the largest amount of natural gas reserves in the world, about one-quarter of the total, and the second-largest oil reserves, Russia is highly dependent on revenues from gas and oil exports, which represent over 60 percent of its exporting agenda and nearly 44 percent of all state budget incomes. These revenues not only ensure political and economic stability, but also allow the country to build its international position based on its vast raw material and energy potential (Konończuk 2009).

Despite the importance of these revenues for the country’s budget, the massive inflow of petrodollars also has a number of negative consequences for the rest of the Russian economy, such as the loss of competitiveness of the industry, since the ruble has become stronger against other currencies. Even worse is that the Russian government systematically ignores the urgent need to take effective measures aimed at promoting much-needed economic and structural reforms. Konończuk (2009:13) contends that

The increasing dependence of the Russian budget on oil-generated incomes and its sensitivity to price changes has brought about a situation wherein maintaining the oil price at a high level has nearly become a *raison d’État* in Russia According to estimates by the Russian government’s experts, a price fall to US\$80 would lead to a reduction in economic growth of 2.5% of GDP and a significant decrease in investments. Should the oil price fall to US\$60, Russia’s GDP would shrink by 1.4% and investments by 6.5%.

Russia has perhaps been the BRICS country most severely hit by the 2008 global financial crisis, which has shown the vulnerabilities of its economy to external turbulences. In 2007, its GDP growth rate reached 8.5 percent, the highest in a decade. It then fell to 5.2 percent in 2008, signaling a cooling. In 2009, it shrank nearly 8 percent. Since then, despite high international oil prices, the country has experienced only modest growth, expanding 0.6 percent in 2014.¹¹ The extreme dependence in oil revenues poses a threat not only to the country’s financial stability, but also to its social stability, as the capacity of the government to perform its core functions, provide basic social welfare services, and meet the increasingly heightened social expectations of its population depends to a large extent on those revenues.

Economic slowdown has also hit India. The country’s GDP growth rate has averaged 6 percent in the past three years, falling from an average 8.4 percent recorded before the 2008 financial crisis¹² to 5.3 percent in 2014.¹³ Although these numbers look good, they are

¹¹ Trading Economics, “Russia GDP Annual Growth Rate, 1996–2015,” <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp-growth-annual>.

¹² Thomas Richardson, “World Economic Outlook, January 2014 Update,” January 2014, <https://www.imf.org/external/country/IND/rr/2014/020314.pdf>.

¹³ Trading Economics, “India GDP Annual Growth Rate, 1951–2015,” <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/gdp-growth-annual>.

largely insufficient to promote long-term sustainable development in a country where nearly 33 percent of the population fall below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day, while almost 70 percent live on less than US\$2 per day.¹⁴ As it happens to Brazil and Russia, India struggles with very poor productive infrastructures. A weak currency, high inflation rates, low agricultural productivity, and a small manufacturing industry contribute to decelerate growth.

Even though the country is considered a technology solutions provider, it suffers with extremely high illiteracy levels. India's fast growth in the past two decades seems to have obscured the fact that the country is near the global bottom in literacy, as, in sheer numbers, it has by far the largest illiterate population¹⁵ in the world. As literacy is an indicator of economic development, one of the main consequences of illiteracy is poverty. India is estimated to have one-third of the world's poor, a fact that certainly negatively influences the country's potential for growth.

Although South Africa is the largest African economy and the only African member of the G20, its economic dimensions, industrial capacity and production, exports level, growth potential, and political clout cannot be compared to those of the other BRICS members. Its economy is much smaller than those of the other members, and its regional influence is really tenuous when compared to the degree of regional influence exerted by the other BRICS. Thus, its entry into the association in 2010 should be seen more as a symbolic political initiative, aimed at expanding the geographic and intercontinental reach of the group into that strategic continent. However, the country does have some characteristics in common with Brazil, Russia, and India: Its current economic growth is lackluster, economic freedom is at a very low level, and industrial infrastructure and business environment are fragile.

As Sharma (2012) noted, it is easier to grow rapidly from a low starting point, which was the case with the BRICS countries, even China. These countries have also generated growth in different ways, at different paces, and often in competing ways. Commodity markets, for example, can cause divergence in economic priorities. Brazil and India tend to focus more on their domestic markets, while China is heavily dependent on foreign markets. Brazil and Russia are important energy producers that benefit from high energy prices, whereas China and India, as major energy consumers, suffer from them and want prices low. These cross-cutting interests have impeded progress in the energy cooperation area. Brazil is a leading global exporter of numerous agricultural commodities, while Russia and China are major importers. China's manufacturing sector contributed to decimate inefficient industries in Brazil, India, and South Africa. Brazil has also suffered with the weak Chinese *yuan*, which has "dampened Brazil's manufacturing export potential by reducing its capacity to compete with Chinese exporters" (Luckhurst, 2013:256). Furthermore, the BRICS countries are also competitors in attracting foreign direct investment from wealthy states, among many other examples of competing economic strategies.

¹⁴ World Bank, "Poverty & Equity: India," 2015, <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Considering all these aspects, most economic indicators suggest that economic growth in this group will not be impressive. Not only are they expected to register only modest growth rates, in different ways and at different paces, but also they are not likely to grow in unison, which has profound implications for their ability to shape the global economic balance of power.

BRICS Cooperation

The BRICS is considered by its members a platform for dialogue and cooperation not only in economic, financial, and development spheres, but also in the political domain. An analysis of some central issues shows points of diplomatic and political convergence and divergence. The main concern seems to be whether, despite their different development strategies, foreign policy priorities, negotiation styles, and repertoires, they will be able to coordinate their actions and interests to formulate and implement a concerted strategy regarding their relations with the leading industrialized states.

The BRICS members have indeed shown a convergence of interests in a number of important issues. They have worked as a group to foster reforms in the existing multilateral financial institutions and the global financial architecture to make them more representative; they have reaffirmed their joint support for an open, transparent, and rules-based multilateral trading system; they have issued repeated warnings over the potential for capital inflows from developed nations to destabilize emerging economies; they tend to resist “interventionist foreign policy doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) emanating from the West, particularly from the United States, and display conservative attitudes on the prerogatives of sovereignty” (Pant 2013: 95); and they opposed the U.S. war in Iraq and have expressed their concerns about the international preeminence of the United States, as well as about the U.S. use of military power around the world.

They also have tried to increase coordination and strengthen cooperation on issues of common interest. During the BRICS Leaders Meeting in Sanya, China, in April 2011, which focused mainly on the governing structure of multilateral financial institutions, they formulated an “Action Plan,” laying the foundations of the BRICS cooperation, which identified 14 programs that should be enhanced, four new areas of cooperation, and five new proposals to explore.¹⁶ As a whole, the initiatives of the “Action Plan” should be seen more as a diplomatic statement of intent than a detailed strategic plan. It reflected a broad consensus that member countries had to work more closely if they were to further deepen multilateral cooperation.

The New Delhi summit in 2012 concentrated on how to further develop and operationalize those ideas. Perhaps the most noteworthy result emerging out of this meeting was the idea of establishing a development bank that might enhance economic ties between them and smaller developing nations, though no further details were provided.

¹⁶ “Full Text of Sanya Declaration of the BRICS Leaders Meeting,” April 14, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2011-04/14/content_1844551.htm.

At the 5th BRICS Summit, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2013, member countries announced the establishment of a new development bank (NDB), whose main task would be to mobilize resources from BRICS nations for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in developing countries. They also proposed to set up a US\$100 billion currency stabilization fund to serve as a form of insurance against volatility in international markets.

The 6th BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, in July 2014, was marked solely by the signing of an agreement to set up the NDB bank and the signing of a protocol setting up an additional capital reserve of US\$100 billion, known as Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which is intended to work as a multilateral currency swap among BRICS central banks and to forestall short-term liquidity pressures, providing additional liquidity protection to members during balance of payments problems. The NDB, designed to have an initial capital of US\$50 billion, allocated in equal parts by the five founding countries, each possessing equal voting power, is expected to begin operating in 2016, after approval of the agreements by the respective parliaments of each country.

These initiatives are clear attempts to exhibit some degree of coordination in order to show that they are also able to set up the agenda for global economic governance and that they deserve, as a group, to have greater voice on global issues. However, BRICS actions have rarely gone beyond the issuing of joint press statements, and certainly the exercise of global leadership demands behavior and concrete actions that go much beyond merely pointing out failures in the international system. Despite effusive mutual praises on the group's apparent achievements, their relations could hardly be described as harmonious. Brütsch and Papa (2013:301) contend that "well-choreographed encounters, handpicked initiatives, or lofty plans [don't] signify that diverse and potentially antagonistic states are either willing or able to translate their combined economic prowess into collective geopolitical clout."

The lack of common ground became evident during the G20 summit in the Australian city of Brisbane on November 15–16, 2014, when the BRICS neither exhibited a common agenda nor presented any joint proposal. The relations between member countries can be simultaneously characterized by competing ambitions at the regional and multilateral level and a high degree of lack of interest in strengthening political ties at the bilateral level, as it became clear during the visit to Russia by Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, in November 2012, in an episode where the Brazilian delegation felt so humiliated and frustrated by the lack of interest shown by Russian authorities that it decided to return home earlier than scheduled. According to Almeida (2010), the BRICS actions are probably led more by a narcissistic drive for contesting the United States and the G7 than by the real intention of establishing a political community united around a common agenda.

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the then BRICs not only gave a clear demonstration of lack of coordination of macroeconomic policies, but also made it clear that they do not speak the same language when it comes to the harmonization of financial, investments, and trade policies. Since the BRICS economies were still strong, their banking sectors had performed well, and they had accumulated substantial foreign currency

reserves, the international community expected them to have a more active role in helping developed countries to overcome the financial tsunami that shook the world economy. Despite diplomatic rhetoric and endless meetings on the issue, the group's contribution to the efforts to overcome the crisis was almost nonexistent.

So far, BRICS members have only allocated scant resources to collective multilateral actions. BRICS governments have offered financial and development assistance mostly on a unilateral basis, which gives them greater individual influence, but little collective clout. The same lack of initiative and collective action capacity that has characterized the bloc can be seen in the ongoing economic and financial difficulties experienced by European countries, as they struggle to save the euro. The talks about the BRICS Development Bank follow the same pattern and are far from being conclusive. There are issues to be solved on which the member countries have not yet reached an agreement and that pose a challenge to that initiative's effectiveness, such as the bank's precise role, funding, and structural issues. Since, for example, any United Nations member state is allowed to join the NDB as a nondebtor member, there exists the real possibility that developed countries come to influence and even dominate the decisionmaking process. Likewise, the existence of strict borrowing limits may undermine the potential of these institutions as alternatives source of funding (ECLAC 2014).

The BRICS also have different perspectives regarding talks on climate change. The Russian government has systematically diverged from the others on core aspects of the environmental negotiations known as "post-Kyoto Protocol," in calling for binding targets for every country, a feature that the Chinese and Indian governments reject.

Likewise, the preliminary talks regarding the creation of a BRICS Defense Council, which should serve as the foundation of a future military alliance, has shown how divided those countries are when it comes to security and defense issues. This military forum is almost exclusively a Russian aspiration, aimed at counterbalancing American influence in the UN system and, more particularly, NATO's expansion and operations. The idea is not entirely discarded by China, and might even be considered one more element in China's strategic competition with the United States. However, Chinese leaders feel that it might end up undermining its well-established position and privileges in the UN Security Council. India and South Africa seem to reject the idea, on the grounds that it would probably be pointless and counterproductive, and that it would only serve to weaken international law. While not endorsing the proposal directly or unreservedly, Brazil might, from a more pragmatic standpoint, take the opportunity to use it as a bargaining chip to pressure the United States into supporting its longstanding aspiration to a permanent seat on a reformed UN Security Council. Therefore, while some agreements on cooperation in issues like cybersecurity and information exchange might be reached, the establishment of a formal defense council, security forum, or military alliance does not appear feasible any time in the near future.

Much in the same vein, they have not been able to fashion a coordinated strategy at the World Trade Organization (WTO), where their interests are mostly divergent. While Brazil and South Africa adopt a more aggressive stance in defense of rapid trade liberalization

for agricultural products, India and China seek to ensure the continued protection of their agricultural sectors, although they would benefit greatly from the reduction of agricultural subsidies on a global scale. Likewise, when it comes to the liberalization of manufactured goods, in the context of the Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) negotiations, the BRICS have been at odds. In order to protect their domestic markets, Brazil and India have adopted a defensive stance, while South Africa and China, whose domestic tariffs are, on average, much lower than those of the other BRICS, have pushed for further reductions.¹⁷

Differences in domestic circumstances, political practices, and traditions influence BRICS relations and also help to explain divergences in their strategic priorities. China is an authoritarian, one-party state, and has been facing challenges coming from a rapidly changing economy and society; while some might consider Russia a formal democracy, it is in fact a corruption-plagued state run by an authoritarian oligarchy averse to freedom of speech and other civil liberties; Brazil and India are young, Western-style multiparty democracies, but have to deal with problems arising from high levels of illiteracy and poverty; South Africa is also considered a stable young democracy, despite concerns about corruption.

The regional role played by the Asian BRICS and their geopolitical ambitions also are central to their relations. Regional rivalries feed mutual distrust and resentment and pose significant risks to inter-BRICS relations in Asia. China, Russia, and India compete for influence and resources in the Central Asia area. In East Asia, although China and Russia have common concerns over the deteriorating political situation on the Korean Peninsula, they have pursued largely different policies toward North and South Korea. Likewise, Moscow and Beijing have adopted divergent positions on critical issues in South Asia. The two countries also disagreed over BRICS enlargement.

The increasing economic and strategic influence of China in Asia, as well as its growing defense capabilities, is a source of unrest for Russian leaders, who believe that they could still maintain military superiority over China. However, China's evolution in all domains has forced the Russians to accept the blunt reality that, for the first time in their recent history, "they will have to deal with a China that is more powerful and dynamic than their own country" (Trenin 2012:1). So far, although fearing China's rise, Moscow has found a way to maintain an acceptable *modus vivendi* with Beijing and continue to value it as a political partner and a global balancer. However, growing pressures from the Russian military to increase arms expenditures and retain tactical nuclear weapons, and the country's failure to live up to its great power ambitions in the Asia-Pacific area, might poison the Sino-Russian relationship. In fact, many in Russia, particularly in the military establishment, feeling uneasy with their junior-partner status, believe that China could eventually pose a greater threat to Russia's security than the United States ever did.

¹⁷ On average, Brazilian bound rates for manufactured goods is 30.8 percent, close to Indian bound rates of 34.6 percent. On the other hand, China and South Africa present much lower bound rates, of 9.1 percent and 15.7 percent, respectively. See World Trade Organization, "World Tariff Profiles 2014," https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/tariff_profiles14_e.pdf.

Tensions also exist in China's relations with India, which is to some extent due to competition over influence in states as Cambodia, Nepal, and Myanmar. Beijing does not intend to feed a geopolitical rival whose power and influence might come to match its own, which is why it does not officially endorse India's claim for a UN Security Council seat. Russia follows the same reasoning. In return, fearing that China might monitor and control its foreign policy initiatives, India has systematically blocked the admission of China in the India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) initiative, a forum for political consultation.

Strategic Culture

Culture has a profound impact in many different fields of human activity, from political and ideological preferences to religious practices and social habits. It influences the way policymakers and strategists think about matters of war and peace, since a deeper understanding of cultural issues can reduce policy failures and advance national interests.

In general, the literature presents two distinct approaches to analyze strategic culture. The most accepted concept is presented by scholars who tend to define strategic culture almost exclusively in terms of military strategy and the use of force in international relations (Snyder 1977; Gray 1981; Booth 1991; Johnston 1995). This view understands strategic culture as a deeply held cultural predisposition for a particular military behavior or thinking, derived from a country's history, geography, national myths and symbols, and political traditions and institutions, among other sources. Booth (1991:121) believes that

it has influence on the form in which one state interacts with the others concerning security measures It includes national traditions, habits, values, attitudes, ways of behaviour, symbols, approaches and special processes chosen to influence external environment and the ways of solution of problems face to face to threats or to using of force.

Johnston (1995:46) emphasizes the role of military influence and grand strategy doctrine in the study of culture. He sees strategic culture as an integrated "system of symbols which acts to establish pervasive and long lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs."

However, strategic culture is not just a product of military culture, and this is not the only area where its influence is felt. It also influences a country's political and foreign policy traditions and practices, which is why the second approach has broadened its concept and has preferred to focus on the "grand strategies of states and include aspects such as economics and diplomatic ways of attaining a state's objectives in addition to military ones" (Howlett 2005:2). Eitelhuber (2009:4–5) contends that "how political power is defined, acquired, legitimized and used and how the outside world is regarded and addressed are thus decisive factors in shaping a state's strategic culture."

Duffield (1999) argues that the foreign policy goals to be pursued by a state, which reflect its identity and interests, are defined by its strategic culture. In this line of thought, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) defines strategic culture as "the combination of internal

and external influences and experiences—geographic, historical, cultural, economic, political, and military—that shape and influence the way a country understands its relationship to the rest of the world, and how a state will behave in the international community” (Bitencourt and Vaz 2009:1). Thus, for the purpose of this study, strategic culture can be understood as a deeply held cultural predisposition for a particular strategic behavior or strategic thinking.

Scholars acknowledge that strategic culture is a product of historical experience. Since these experiences differ across states, different states have different strategic cultures. Johnston (1995:34) claims that “different states have different predominant strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, and are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites.” Broadly speaking, strategic culture is more than an alternative way of explaining strategic behavior. It seeks to explore causal explanations for regular patterns of state behavior and to generate generalizations from its conclusions. It is a concept that can be more useful when used as a complement to other theoretical traditions. Desch (1998:166) contends that, as a supplement to existing theories, cultural theories have at least three potential contributions to make:

First, cultural variables may explain the lag between structural change and alterations in state behavior. Second, they may account for why some states behave irrationally and suffer the consequences of failing to adapt to the constraints of the international system. Finally, in structurally indeterminate situations, domestic variables such as culture may have a more independent impact.

Desch’s arguments help to explain why the rise of emerging powers has the potential to affect the balance of power in the international system. Analyzing these countries’ strategic culture can help policymakers and scholars to understand the rationale behind their perceptions, the reasons why each country decided to join the BRICS, what influences their foreign policies, how they see the world and why they behave the way they do.

China

Ancient China was traditionally depicted as a nonviolent defensive-minded country, with a feeble warlike tradition, and a cultural preference for peaceful solutions over expansionism. However, the present image of the country is completely opposed to that perception, as China has been considered an increasingly aggressive, assertive, and belligerent nation.

Scobell (2002) argues that both views on the Chinese strategic culture are flawed, as it cannot be accurately characterized either as pacifist or bellicose, as China has an apparently paradoxical “dualistic” strategic culture based at the same time on conflict-averse and defensive-minded Confucian-Mencian principles and on realpolitik tenets, which favors military solutions and is offensive oriented, coupled with a strong nationalism. Scobell argues that both lines of thought are operative and influence and combine in dialectic fashion to form a Chinese “cult of defense.” In consequence, Chinese leaders tend to “pursue offensive military operations as a primary alternative in pursuit of

national goals, while rationalizing these actions as being purely defensive and last resort” (Scobell 2002:1).

According to Kenneth Johnson (2009:10), this Chinese cult of defense means that even though

Chinese strategic culture is primarily pacifistic, defensive, and nonexpansionist, its leaders are nevertheless predisposed to deploy force when confronting threats to China’s core interests. When doing so, any war China fights would be seen as “just” and any military action defensive, even when it is offensive in nature.

China’s main strategic interest is to modernize. Within this strategy, its number one priority is economic development. To achieve this goal, the country has adopted a pragmatic approach, greatly reducing the role of ideology in economic policy. As a result, China has been the world’s fastest-growing economy for over three decades. Its foreign policy reflects this pragmatism and this priority. Its efforts are directed toward promoting the country’s economic growth, maintain access to markets both to imports and exports, acquire and develop new technologies, and ensure the supply of much-needed raw materials.

The country’s leaders are aware that Chinese economic development will not only increase its influence worldwide, but can also generate concerns about the country’s capabilities and intentions. For these reasons, China’s foreign policy has been built around two concepts: “peaceful development” (or “peaceful rise”) and international engagement (Johnson 2009). The idea behind these concepts is that Beijing is committed to show the international community that the country’s military and economic prominence will not pose a threat to peace and stability to any country, and that other nations will benefit from China’s growing power and influence.

These concepts also stress the importance of soft power in the country’s foreign relations and are partially based on the premise that good relations with its neighbors can enhance China’s power rather than diminish it. In consequence, the country should never seek hegemony or superpower status. It does not mean, however, that the country will not use force or coercion to advance its national interests if these measures are considered defensive.

As Chinese leaders seem strongly committed to discredit the “China threat” theory, the country has not only continuously built and expanded its web of relationships with other nations, but also adopted a more proactive and cooperative stance in multilateral institutions such as the WTO and the IMF.

The fact is that China has little or no incentive to promote a change in the international political system, to create a new world order, or to challenge U.S. hegemony. On the contrary, in order to achieve its main objective, economic development, the country is probably more interested in preserving the status quo. A plausible explanation about why China bestows some value to the BRICS is because, consistent with the principles of “peaceful development” and “international engagement,” it can use the group to “reduce

the impression it is seeking a superpower role in world affairs by emphasizing multilateralism and its status as a developing nation” (Luckhurst 2013:259). By adopting such behavior, China conveys the message that it does not want to be seen as a revisionist country, which acts driven by its own individual interests, but as a moderate country that, within the framework of a collective action, can contribute to the reform and improvement of the global governance, without fundamentally challenging the status quo. Cooperation is possible, but within the framework of the current world order.

While some analysts argue that China remains confused and hesitant in participating in international affairs, evidence indicates that, on the contrary, the country is well aware of its political, economic, and geostrategic weight, which is why it does not need, does not want, and does not seek to harmonize its policies with the interest and priorities of its emerging partners. It acts just like the United States, and avoids forging alliances and partnerships that could impose some kind of restraint in its freedom of action. Its economic development is its top priority and its geopolitical neighborhood is the focus of its power projection; global issues remain secondary. In this context, as China proceeds steadily in its path to become a superpower, it is likely that the country will attribute less importance to the BRICS when that group is no longer needed to shield China's emergence.

Brazil

Two of the most important traits of the Brazilian strategic culture are that the country sees itself a peaceful nation and a deeply held belief that the country is destined for greatness. These two ingrained and intertwined cultural values have a profound impact upon the country's security thought and foreign policy.

Over time, Brazil has unequivocally expressed its reliance on and preference for negotiated solutions for conflicts. Actually, both the country's constitution and the national defense strategy explicitly “underscore and build perceptions of security upon peace and the peaceful resolution of conflicts” (Bitencourt and Vaz 2009:4). Due to its economic weight, Brazil has been actively seeking to raise its profile on the international stage, in order to have a greater voice in global affairs, but it has done so through political and diplomatic channels, never resorting to the threat or use of force.

As meaningful examples of this political determination, Brazil, which once was on the verge of acquiring offensive nuclear weapons, “communicated its decision not to pursue them in the interests of fostering regional and global peace” (Bitencourt and Vaz 2009:9) in the early 1990s. Likewise, the country was the driving force behind the creation of the South American Defense Council, a mechanism established in 2009 whose main objective is to consolidate the region as a zone of peace and democratic stability. The Council also seeks a South American identity in the field of defense, through the strengthening of cooperation, military exchanges and exercises, and the implementation of confidence-building measures. Furthermore, over the course of its more than 500-year history, Brazil has not had any serious military conflict with its neighbors, with the exception of the Cisplatine War (1825–28) and the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–70).

At the same time, although the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, known as Itamaraty, traditionally depicts the country as a *satisfied* or *status quo* nation, deprived of major ambitions, the country is anything but satisfied with the current global order, a stance consistent with its drive for greatness. Eakin (2009:12) argues that “Brazilian elites began the twentieth century very unsure of themselves and in their place in the larger world. They begin the twenty-first century with a growing self-assurance and self-confidence that Brazil is now becoming not only a regional, but also a world power.”

As Brazil struggles to have a bigger influence on global issues, and tries to make the transition from “rule-taker” to “rule-maker” in international affairs (McCoy 2009), the Itamaraty seems to understand that there are only two ways to achieve this objective, which are complementary rather than antithetical. The first one is to adopt a more proactive foreign policy and to engage actively in the activities of multilateral organizations within the framework of the current international order. The country has been an active member of the WTO, IMF, and World Bank, has been a constant presence in the UN Security Council, has led the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), and has been a key member in the discussions on climatic change, for example. This multilateral approach does not mean the adoption of a new political or economic agenda, but it is merely an attempt to gain leverage within existing mechanisms.

The second strategy is twofold. On one hand, the country vigorously advocates reforms in the global governance system, which might favor its interests. Brazil has worked hard to push for reform of the UN Security Council structure in order to get a permanent seat, it has been a longtime supporter of a radical overhaul of the international financial architecture and multilateral financial institutions, and is one of the most active supporters of a global trade system that provides more benefits to both developing and least-developed countries. On the other hand, Brazil tries to take the lead in building political and economic alliances, partnerships, and integration blocs in order to multiply, maximize, and spread its influence. The Common Market of the South (Mercosur), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the IBSA Forum, the South American-Arab Countries (ASPA) initiative, and the BRICS are examples of this strategy. Brazil sees its BRICS affiliation as a passport to global leadership and as one of its top priorities. In this context, it might adopt any necessary measures to reach its objectives, as contradictory and inconsistent with the country's traditions and beliefs as they might be.

Russia

Contrary to the Brazilian and Chinese strategic cultures, Russia displays a propensity to use force to achieve its strategic objectives. However, even though the country's strategic culture can be considered “stable with respect to the prevailing threat perception and Russia's quest for great power status” (Eitelhuber 2009:2), some changes have been going on after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most conspicuously, the perceived role of military strength as the only source of power has declined, insofar as economic power has become more important. It does not mean that Russia has abandoned military strength as a source of power and political influence and as an important tool in its international relations. Rather, military power is still the chief institutional foundation of Russian statehood.

However, economic development can also be considered one of the main driving forces behind its foreign policy. After abandoning its ambitions to spread communist revolution around the world, Russia appears to exhibit a behavior in its foreign affairs that is not different from what would be expected from a country that once was a superpower, declined sharply, and is now, after recovering some strength and influence, trying to find its place in the international order.

It must not be forgotten, however, that by its own nature, Russia is a revisionist country and is extremely sensitive to Western actions aimed at promoting liberal democratic principles and forging military alliances in what it still perceives as its regional “sphere of influence.” The Russian state was born and expanded in a state of semi-permanent warfare. Over the course of the country’s history, from Imperial times to the Soviet era, the notion that its territory and resources were the object of neighboring and enemy states’ expansionist and bellicose ambitions not only shaped Russian threat perceptions, but also contributed to forge a strong nationalism, which is part and parcel of the Russian national identity. The country’s strategic culture and its great-power aspirations are thus founded upon “an almost obsessive perception of a general threat toward Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Eitelhuber 2009: 27), and an exacerbated nationalism, centered on the country’s interests, security, and global influence. The annexation of Crimea, in March 2014, and the ensuing support to separatist movements in Ukraine clearly follow this pattern. Other elements also contribute to shape the country’s strategic culture, such as the deeply rooted authoritarian leadership style and the political culture. To Ermarth (2006:6)

Russian political culture has been a major contributor to strategic culture, especially to its militarization. Political culture is itself very “martial” or harmonious with military values in that it is grounded on the principle of *kto-kovo* (literally “who-whom”), i.e., who dominates over whom by virtue of coercive power or status imparted by higher authority.

Russian political elites tend to see the characteristic traits of democracy, such as freedom of political expression, political pluralism, freedom of speech, and the due process of law “not as the enabling conditions of a legitimate polity, but as instruments to be manipulated, controlled or combated for the benefit of the central authority” (Ermarth 2006:6). This specific feature has important implications for Russian foreign policy. Now that the country has overcome the chaotic period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian leaderships have systematically manifested their desire to restore their nation back to its former great-power status, which is a major driving factor in Russian foreign policy. The country not only wants to increase and project its influence and power in its geographic region, but also aims to be a more significant actor in the international arena.

Russian leaderships appear to see the world primarily through a realist prism, in which the search for a balance of power is a permanent feature. To them, Russia’s mission is to promote the emergence of a multipolar world, in order to contain and counterbalance the magnitude of the American power. The main elements of Russia’s strategic culture—combativeness, competitiveness, political assertiveness (Ermarth 2006) and a tough stance

against what is perceived as the greatest threat to its security and ambitions, the United States—are present in the country's renewed aspirations for great-power status.

To a large extent, Russian foreign policy mirrors its political culture. The *kto-kovo* tradition has implications for the country's international relations, as it represents a tendency to see "foreign states or actors as either enemies, or subjects, or transient allies, or useful fools to be manipulated" (Ermarth 2006:6). That helps to explain why Russia manifests a preference for developing its multipolar strategy on the level of other major powers, be it through bilateral agreements or through forming a variety of coalitions, rather than through the framework of international institutions.

That is why Russia highly values its BRICS membership, especially because the bloc's approach coincides perfectly with Russia's vision of a multipolar world. The group can provide Russia with a geopolitical cover, as it is considered not only as another instrument to help counterbalance U.S. power, while avoiding a direct confrontation, but also as a platform to advance other Russian geostrategic interests, such as balancing China's rise. This is even more evident now that Russia has been excluded from the G8 after the invasion of Crimea, and might feel tempted to use the BRICS as an indication that it did not become isolated internationally. There is, however, a clear mismatch between Russia's intentions and the immediate aims of the other members. Contrary to their expectations and interests, Russia has pushed for further integration and wants to provide the bloc with a more defined institutional structure and even a defense council, but it has not been successful so far.

India

Discerning the underlying traits of India's strategic culture is not an easy task, due to the extreme diversity of the Indian society, marked by ethnic, religious, linguistic, caste, and regional differences. At least three different streams of thinking, namely Nehruvianism, Neoliberalism, and Hyperrealism (Bajpai 2002), vie for dominance and try to explain the nature of the national strategic culture, which raises questions about its existence. These approaches, however, share some basic assumptions, which represent the core of the national strategic thinking and will be briefly examined here, while acknowledging that there may exist some other elements in common.

The first trait is the deeply rooted conviction that India is not merely another nation-state, but a distinct civilization, with a rich and old history. The main implication of this characteristic is that India sees the international system as hierarchical, not anarchic or egalitarian. The "singularity" of the country means a natural claim to greatness and cultural superiority. Its major-power status should thus be given, not earned. According to Jones (2006:7), "India's strategic culture sees status as an objective reality, a matter for other states to recognize and act in accordance with, not a favor for other states to confer."

Consistent with this notion of uniqueness is the perception that the country has the mission to bring to the world its distinct voice, whose political expression is its traditional neutrality. This is why India avoids being closely tied to countries or blocs. Actually, with the exception of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India is not

a member of any economic bloc or formal regional grouping. The essence of Indian security and foreign policies lies in “its quest for strategic autonomy. To understand this, it must be realized that India is largely friendless in the world today. India has friendly relations with many states but friendship with none” (Singh 2009:5).

Far from meaning that India rejects the current world order and refuses to engage in international institutions and norms, which would be an entirely wrong proposition—as the country has been a strong advocate of the United Nations, the global trade system, and the international law and principles, especially when they work in its favor—this means that India has a pragmatic approach to international relations. Its strategic culture posits no permanent enemies or friends; it is “flexible rather than doctrinally prescriptive on specific issues of war and peace, foreign or defense policy” (Jones 2006:28). Driven by its aspirations to be a great power, India’s actions are taken and adopted according to the probability that they have to increase its international status.

Even though it shares a border with two potential “enemies,” India tends to give priority to dialogue over the use of military power in foreign policy. For this reason, Jones (2006:24) argues that “India has been prudent in seeking a nonconfrontational relationship with China in which trade channels and other forms of exchange are growing.” If, however, the use of force is deemed necessary, as last resort, the country will not refrain from using it, as several skirmishes with Pakistan along the common border over the course of the last 50 years have shown.

India is not a revisionist country and, despite its age-old history and culture, it is not yet a major global military or economic power, with the ability to project its influence beyond its immediate neighborhood. The country not only lacks the strategic weight required to shape global affairs, but to some extent, it also seems not to have a culture of strategic planning. Indian leaders usually limit themselves to pursue short-term opportunistic policies, for immediate benefit, rather than identifying potentially more useful and profitable longer-term objectives and the means to achieve them. By joining other important emerging powers, Delhi appears to see its BRICS affiliation as a useful instrument to obtain the international respect it thinks it deserves, without having to incur the risks and costs of joining a more formal economic or political bloc.

South Africa

Due to a lack of historical perspective and an almost absolute absence of literature on the subject, South African strategic culture is not analyzed in this paper. Even though emerging practices may be discernible in the post-apartheid South African society, it is too early to state that they form a consistent pattern. However, South African membership to the BRICS club is not irrelevant. Its addition in 2010 helped to strengthen the group’s image as a legitimate representative of the developing world. The incorporation of South Africa contributed to give the BRICS greater representativeness and even legitimacy, and made more credible the claims that the group arguably stands for the aspirations and interests of developing nations. To the country, its membership helped to strengthen its claim to continental leadership.

Strategic culture matters. It can represent an invaluable tool in helping to explain strategic behavior and foreign policy preferences. It has shown that the BRICS nations display completely different patterns of strategic thinking, reflected in different political systems, world views, and foreign policy practices, which makes it difficult for them to implement a partnership based upon shared beliefs and norms that might encourage them to undertake a much-needed vertical cooperation. All of them show some degree of a desire for “greatness,” but they pursue different paths and approaches to reach their objectives. Although this shared ambition can “inspire coalitional cohesion sufficient for soft reformist targets the prospects for community building remain elusive” (Brütsch and Papa 2013:325). Most importantly, these nations do not present the strategic posture, resources, willingness, and the global commitments needed to forge a new international order.

Conclusions

Individually, the BRICS have become relevant actors in the international arena and cannot be ignored any longer. Their attempt to boost economic and political cooperation in the South-South axis is laudable and necessary, as it represents a strategy of diversification of partners in a context of crisis. Furthermore, the group has adopted and advocated some bold and important measures to foster multilateral cooperation and to reform the global governance architecture. These measures, however, are limited in their depth, scope, and acceptance, which reflect the group’s lack of cohesion, resources, priorities, economic models, foreign policy interests, and, consequently, their incapacity to shape their own international agenda. While the group may be able to build consensus on softer reformist issues, it has become increasingly clear that the possibilities of a BRICS concerted action toward the making of a new international order have become less and less compatible with reality.

It certainly does not mean that analysts and policymakers should disregard the BRICS potential as a political partnership or its usefulness as a diplomatic tool, since its members combine considerable assets. It also does not mean that the association is doomed to be only a bargaining coalition. However, the BRICS should not be portrayed as the center of a future political community that heralds a true shift in global power from a U.S.-centered basis to a world with multiple emerging centers of power. It is more adequate to understand the BRICS as a “relatively successful ‘international regime’ operating in a specifically designated field, rather than the harbinger of a profoundly novel global order” (Ünay 2013:79).

Even adopting a more limited perspective, centered on bringing gradual improvements to the global political economy, its alignment prospects depend largely on four factors. First, the political willingness of those countries’ leaders to make the association a priority; second, the ability of those leaders to overcome and reconcile diverging interests and ambitions between countries with different resources, strategic cultures, and diplomatic practices; third, their ability to withstand the political and economic costs of countering U.S. power; and finally, the adoption of concrete measures to deepen cooperation and effectively develop strategic intragroup relationships. Without this combined set of

variables, the BRICS may be doomed to be only another good idea that did not work out as it was expected.

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