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THE QUEST FOR SECURITY AND STABILITY

CAN THE WORLD BE PEACEFUL?

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REGIONAL SCENARII AND NATIONAL POLICIES

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The BRICS

A CONJURED CONCLAVE?

BRICS claims notwithstanding, the organisation has produced mediocre results so far, more so of its own making than because of external factors—it has lost much of its original burnish. BRICS was amongst the first organised attempts to challenge the existing politicoeconomic world order after the end of the Cold War. It had then been forecast that in about 10 years, BRICS would become the largest economic bloc in terms of gross domestic product output and the existing international economic architecture would be forced to undergo major change. In addition, it was predicted that BRICS could rival the G-7 by 2032. This paper however challenges the projected growth and influence of BRICS and argues that far from rivalling the G-7, BRICS could become a distant memory if growth figures decline across the spectrum. Geopolitics, entrenched structural complexities together with conflicting interests may pull apart the constituent units of the conclave sooner rather than later.

ATTAR RABBANI

INTRODUCTION

In November 2012, the Conference Board of the United States of America (US) published its *Global Economic Outlook* (online at http://www.conference-board.org) which questioned the BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) miracle. The report argued that these nations had for long picked the "low hanging fruit" of cheap labour and imported technology. It added that China's double digit growth would soon become a "romantic memory" with a likely fall in growth to 6.9 per cent the following year and to 5.5 in 2014–18 and 3.7 in 2019–25 (Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, "US Conference Board fears BRICS Miracle over as World faces Decade Long Slump", *The Telegraph*, 13 November 2012, online at http://www.telegraph.co.uk). Moribund investment returns and the aging crisis in China were also identified as hard hitting factors. On India, the report stated that the reform agenda had been almost "derailed" and growth was likely to fall from 5.5 per cent to 4.5 until 2018 and then to 3.2 per cent. It concluded that the three major BRICS economies—China, India and Brazil—had reached bottleneck corners and would experience decline unseen in the recent past. The declining growth in key constituent units would obviously affect the organisation's ability to influence the global balance of power.

After Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs published his paper *Building Better Global Economic BRICs* (Global Economics Paper 66, 30 November 2001, online at http://www.goldmansachs.com), the BRIC states as if on cue huddled into an organised exercise to increase their share of the global economic and political pie. A dynamic was injected into the exercise despite divergent economic and political structural collections in the domestic realm. The first official BRIC summit held in Yekaterinburg, Russia in June 2009, hoped for a more democratic world order upholding "the rule of international law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation and coordinated action" as guiding principles while deciding on issues, challenges and concerns affecting world peace and security (Andrew E Kramer, "Emerging Economies meet in Russia", *The New York Times*, 16 June 2009, online at http://www.nytimes.com). The demand for refurbishing the existing world order in view of the prevailing scenario was the dominant theme of the conclave and has remained so ever since.

By setting up its own bank and other auxiliaries, BRICS is trying to influence global economic governance and hopes to have a bargaining chip to circumvent its inadequate "voice and representation" in view of the lukewarm response from Western powers to the demand for structural reforms.

Despite the global financial crisis affecting BRICS economies, the banking sector stayed relatively healthy as growth in China and India remained robust. The group, on the back of domestic demand, overcame the negative course better than developed economies. In fact some analysts had commented then that the BRICS economies had not only enhanced their collective position in global economic and financial systems but that the organisation was also likely to push for greater coordination within itself and become a "stabilising factor" in the global economy (*The BRICS Report 2012*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp79–102, online at https://global.oup.com). The five nations collectively represent about 40 per cent of the Earth's demography, a quarter of its economic output and not surprisingly soon flexed their muscle to extract the maximum advantage from the world economic order. China replaced Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010 and Brazil surpassed the United Kingdom as the world's sixth largest economy in 2012. Moreover the collective economic profile of the conclave was so bright that some analysts stated it could rival the US and surpass the G-7 by 2032.

BRICS's main grievance is that the present governing international financial structure does not serve its interests. One summit communiqué ("Sanya Declaration of the BRICS Leaders Meeting", *Xinhua News*, 14 April 2011, online at http://news.xinhuanet.com) stated that the global financial architecture deprived BRICS members of an adequate "voice and representation" and the issue of structural reform had not been addressed with any measure of seriousness so far. Members therefore decided to help themselves and agreed to open mutual credit lines using national currencies. China and Russia in particular have been determined to challenge the dollar's hegemony and have agreed to carry out bilateral engagement in a third currency. BRICS has also discussed its own development bank, stock exchange and infrastructure trade. The BRICS development bank has an opening capital of $50 billion and mobilises resources for infrastructure and development projects. By setting up its own bank and other auxiliaries, BRICS is trying to influence global economic governance and hopes to have a bargaining chip to circumvent its inadequate "voice and representation" in view of the lukewarm response from Western powers to the demand for structural reforms. At the 2013 Durban summit, BRICS agreed to the establishment of the development bank with "substantive and sufficient" resources to feed infrastructure (Dani Rodrik, "What the World needs from the BRICS", *Project Syndicate*, 10 April 2013, online at http://www.project-syndicate.org). It also decided to set up $100 billion "stabilisation fund" to guard against future volatility emanating from world events. With these preceding facts as the background, this paper now examines the afflicting variables of declining growth rates, geopolitics and entrenched structural complexities which might bring about the demise of BRICS sooner rather than later.

DECLINING GROWTH RATES

A major point of current academic discussion is declining growth in BRICS member nations. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) growth forecast for China for 2012 was eight per cent, its worst performance in decades (Tom Orlik, "IMF Forecasts Lower China Growth, Warns Debt", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2013, online at http://online.wsj.com). According to Nomura Securities International (*Asia Special Report – China: Rising Risks of Financial Crisis*, 15 March 2013, online at http://www.nomura.com), China slipped to the level of the US, Japan, Spain and Thailand in its financial risk profile during the financial crisis. Rising property prices and a sudden build-up of financial leverage indicated impending growth decline. In fact, China's gross domestic product annual growth stood at 7.1 per cent in July 2014 but slipped to 6.7 per cent by the end of July 2016—the lowest full year number since the 1990s (Mark Magnier, "China's Economic Growth 2015 is Slowest in 25 Years", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2016, online at https://www.wsj.com). Chinese growth propelled by infrastructure investment and exports has slowed down despite attempts to regain equilibrium. Consequently, future growth in China is likely to remain below expectations. Some observers have suggested that the Chinese economy may be heading towards troubling uncertainties given its high financial leverage among BRICS states.

Chinese growth propelled by infrastructure investment and exports has slowed down despite attempts to regain equilibrium. Consequently, future growth in China is likely to remain below expectations.

The Indian growth rate may also move southward. The Narendra Modi led government has been trying to fast-forward economic reforms and accelerate growth through measures like loan waivers, tax holidays, etc but the efforts have not brought about much faster growth. India grew by 7.24 per cent and 7.56 per cent in 2014–15 and 2015–16 respectively. Moreover, on 8 November 2016, the government demonetised the high value currency notes of ₹500 and ₹1000 (80 per cent of the currency in circulation), which contracted developmental activities. The IMF has revised projections for India at 6.6 per cent from the earlier estimate of 7.6 per cent in light of the demonetisation ("IMF cuts India's Gross Domestic Product Forecast to 6.6 per cent on Note Ban Woes", online at http://www.livemint.com). In addition, rising oil prices could adversely impact the Indian economy and derail the growth cart, if not handled circumspectly.

Russian economic prospects have been disappointing as well. According to the IMF, the Russian economy grew by 4.3 per cent in 2011 and would continue to grow by around 3.7 to 3.8 per cent (RIA Novosti, "European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Predicts Russian Economic Slowdown in 2013–14", 26 October 2012, online at http://en.ria.ru). The flight of foreign capital has been a major detrimental factor resulting in domestic and overseas investors losing confidence. Structural bottlenecks have arguably held Russia back from emerging as an economic powerhouse in the region. In addition, the country has been reeling under American and European economic sanctions for annexing the Crimean province of the Ukraine and these have diminished its economic prospects (Nicholas Megaw, "Russian Trade hit by Sanctions and Commodity Crisis", *Financial Times*, 14 February 2106, online at https://www.ft.com). The Russian economy's relatively better performance lately may be attributed to its sheer size and the political acumen of President Vladimir Putin.

Both the Brazilian and South African economies have also shown corresponding negative trends. In 2011, Brazil's economy grew by only 2.7 per cent compared to 7.5 in 2010 (Paulo Winterstein and Darcy Crowe, "Latin America Boon Starts to Fade", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2013, online at http://online.wsj.com). In fact, Brazil seems to be the worst-off constituent among the conclave. South Africa, the smallest partner with a population of just over 40 million and a smaller economy, is a reluctant constituent. Its economic prospects have also lost their gloss as Nigeria is poised to emerge as Africa's largest economy by the end of the current decade. Nigeria is in fact already the continent's most populous nation and largest oil producer and thus favourably positioned to overtake South Africa in gross domestic product terms in a few years (MJ Smith, "Nigeria Set to Overtake South Africa as Africa's Biggest Economy", *Mail & Guardian*, 5 March 2013, online at http://mg.co.za). South Africa's influence in the region has been modest and has barely shown an upward tilt. In spite of the political opportunity to steer the continent, the country has failed to generate crucial response from other states.

GEOPOLITICS

BRICS no doubt intends to shape global governance through better coordination and its nations do have some converging geopolitical interests.

Member states have been acting in concert on global trade and climate change negotiations and have called for urgent structural reforms in the current global financial architecture, which they perceive as not catering to their interests. Likewise, they are also concerned about the global dominance of the US and have consistently opposed its use of military means to resolve political problems—Iraq, Libya and Syria. In particular, China, Russia and India have been vocal about Washington's attempts to override issues of "national sovereignty" by citing principles of "responsibility to protect" and interference in the domestic affairs of states without proper United Nations authorisation. American air strikes against Iraq in 1998, Yugoslavia in 1999, against Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Western intervention in Libya in 2011 were all bitterly disapproved by BRICS member nations, which stated that such unauthorised unilateral actions destroy the principle of "national sovereignty" and deflate the United Nations system.

Moreover BASIC (Brazil–South Africa–India–China), a variant of BRICS, mounted a collective effort at the Copenhagen Summit on climate change in 2009 to oppose environmental protection measures proposed by European states and the US. BASIC members were against Washington's attempt to link trade with labour and environmental standards as it could slow down their economic development. Instead they proposed joint positions in World Trade Organisation and global negotiations, which could give them the desired leverage over the industrialised North. In addition, they demanded greater liberalisation with regard to agricultural trade and a tightening on rules governing waste dumping on the shores of developing countries. BASIC also opposed carbon emission caps proposed by the industrialised world.

BRICS member states are concerned about the global dominance of the US, have consistently opposed its use of military means to resolve political problems and have stated that unauthorised unilateral actions destroy the principle of "national sovereignty" and deflate the United Nations system.

BRICS has repeatedly exhibited disquiet over the slow pace of reforms in international financial institutions. The 2012 summit declaration (Government of India, "Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration", 29 March 2012, online at http://mea.gov.in) called for speedy implementation of suggested measures such as quota and governance reforms for emerging economies at the IMF.

"We (BRICS) are concerned at the slow pace of quota and governance reforms in the IMF. We see an urgent need to implement, as agreed, the 2010 Governance and Quota Reform before the 2012 IMF/World Bank annual meeting, as well as the comprehensive review of the quota formula to better reflect economic weights and enhance the voice and representation of emerging market and developing countries by January 2013. ... This dynamic process of reform is necessary to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Fund".

BRICS however did not take expected postures on several important issues. For instance, with regard to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March 2011, online at http://www.un.org) on authorising a "no-fly zone" over Libya and "all necessary measures" for protecting civilians, Russia, China, India and Brazil abstained from voting. The abstentions conveyed different approaches of the states. Those of India and Brazil conveyed a firm "no" to the use of force, while South Africa chose to vote in favour of the resolution. The Russian and Chinese abstentions were actually a "yes" albeit with certain reservations, as their veto would have stalled the resolution. This voting pattern showed a lack of coherent response as a conclave, which aspires to shape the emerging global order. It is difficult to imagine a future for BRICS if members cannot go beyond mere rhetoric and cling to the geopolitical calculus come what may. The organisation seems ill-prepared to face reality head on and if not reversed a course of indecisiveness and/or self-centred attitude may well spell its gradual demise.

THE CHINA CHILLI

The China "chilli" could overturn the BRICS bandwagon, more than any other comparable variable. The country's astounding rise on the global stage makes other members nervous at its spreading might. China's very presence makes the conclave and its oft-repeated objective of reordering the global economic architecture with coordinated moves seem like a pipe dream. For example, the Chinese economy is larger than all other BRICS economies combined. China accounted for 38 per cent of the $282 billion export trade among member states in 2012 (Joe Leahy, Andrew England and Victor Mallet, "Reality Bites for Emerging Market Reliance on Chinese Growth", *Financial Times*, 31 May 2013, online at http://www.ft.com). The Russian and Brazilian economies depend substantially on exporting raw material to China. There are also fears that the BRICS bank will be dominated by Beijing. The Chinese suggested willingness to sponsor some of Brazil's and South Africa's initial contribution to the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA) may be viewed as a sign of things to come ("BRICS to Set Up $100 Billion Reserve Fund", *South Africa Information*, 6 September 2013, online at http://www.southafrica.info). As a balancing act, other members may look for alternate avenues for investment and possibly also search for potential alliances and partners. India's quest to be closer to the US on geostrategic issues is not consistent with its BRICS membership.

The other economies have been incurring losses on the manufacturing front with China's currency manipulations compelling them to opt for protective measures. A number of small/medium sized industries in Brazil, India and South Africa have gone out of business as a result of Chinese exports. Towns and cities in these countries are flooded with cheap Chinese goods. Local manufacturers fear social "fads" of buying low-cost Chinese goods at the expense of homemade quality products. India has imposed antidumping duties on a number of Chinese imports to cushion its small businesses. Moreover, China has garnered large profits from intra-south trade operations with others lagging behind. A growing economic nationalism in Brazil, Russia and India has sprung from the fear of one economy undermining the other.

A number of small/medium sized industries in Brazil, India and South Africa have gone out of business as a result of Chinese exports. Towns and cities in these countries are flooded with cheap Chinese goods. Local manufacturers fear social "fads" of buying low-cost Chinese goods at the expense of homemade quality products.

Friction between China and Brazil has worsened despite bilateral trade growing by leaps and bounds from $6.7 billion in 2003 to 75 billion in 2012 to $86.67 in 2014. Factors feeding the tension include China's dumping of exports diverted from Europe, the influx of investment and cheap products and China's growing investments in the Americas. Brazil views China as an unfair competitor as it has put stiff non-tariff riders on exports from Brazil. Brasília has also accused Beijing of undervaluing the yuan thereby discouraging imports. China's investment in Brazil however has been steadily rising from $500 million in 2009 to $19 billion in 2010 and is projected to reach $81 billion—making China the largest single foreign investor ("Brazil's Trade Policy: Seeking Protection", *The Economist*, 14 June 2013 and "A Golden Opportunity: China's President Ventures into Donald

Trump's Backyard", *The Economist*, 17 November 2016, online at http://www.economist.com). The most worrying development for Brazil however has been China's financial investments in other South American countries which it sees as its natural sphere of influence. Chinese financial manoeuvres are both short and long-term in nature, capable of wiping out some Brazilian industries. Akin to India, Brazil has also started levying import tariffs on Chinese industrial goods as a protective measure.

The China–Russia partnership is also a marriage of convenience rather than a philosophical commitment to collective endeavours. Russia is wary of the growing economic disparity with China. Militarily, China has long surpassed Russia to become a dominant force in Asia and elsewhere, despite the fact that China buys most of its conventional armaments from Russia (Georgy Bvot, "China's Favourite Junior Partner", *The Moscow Times*, 27 March 2013, online at http://www.themoscowtimes.com). It is feared that should China replace the US as the global hegemon, it could become the most immediate security threat to Russia. The relationship thus remains one-sided and before long Beijing may start acting as a kingmaker if not the king. It is this realisation perhaps that better explains Moscow's moves to engage Asian states like Japan, South Korea and Vietnam.

Sino–Indian and Sino–South African ties have also become strained. While India tries to sound upbeat about its deepening partnership with Beijing and promises to meet it half way in carving out a mutually enriching future, New Delhi realises that all is not well. The Indian government has had to acknowledge that China is on course to gaining a foothold in South Asia, a natural sphere of Indian influence and has reiterated the importance of being "prepared" rather than sorry. Moreover China's implicit refusal to acknowledge the rise of India may be taken as a hint of things to come. While bilateral trade in 2012 was worth \$55 billion, India incurred a net trade deficit of \$23 billion and the latter figure was \$53 billion in 2015–16 ("India's Trade Deficit with China Widens to \$23 Billion", *The Economic Times*, 11 November 2012 and "India's Trade Deficit with China Jumps to \$53 Billion in 2015–16", *The Economic Times*, 1 August 2016, online at http://economictimes.indiatimes.com). In no way can this be viewed as a sustainable let alone balanced relationship, whichever way one defines the deficit. Concerns have also been growing in South Africa with regard to its relations with China. Cheap Chinese imports have already forced the closure of several textile mills, besides creating a huge trade imbalance. Due to the onslaught of these goods, public protests broke out in several parts of the country. Chinese goods have flooded not only South Africa but several other major countries on the African continent prompting former South African President Thabo Mbeki to say that Africa had become an "economic colony" of China (Yaroslav Trofimov, "In Africa, China's Expansion begins to Stir Resentment", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2007, online at http://online.wsj.com).

STRUCTURAL COMPLEXITIES

The very idea of BRICS is problematic and could potentially render the organisation redundant. Not all five members are equally committed to changing the global order. Brazil, India and South Africa are interested in reforming the United Nations Security Council, each being desirous of a permanent berth and all three also seek a redistribution of power. Russia and China show no enthusiasm about reforms, are already permanent members and prefer the status-quo as they are among its beneficiaries. Although BRICS as an organisation does discuss reforms to reflect changing global realities, Russia and China in reality are two of the biggest obstacles to such reforms.

BRICS members also do not agree on the nature of a prospective new global order. By their own admission, the existing global order deprives them of an adequate "voice and representation" and hence comprehensive reform is imperative. They emphasise that the new order ought to meet the aspirations of the developing world, besides offering suitable and sufficient access to resources for sustainable development. The five states however have failed to articulate an alternative, except for a commitment to maintain "independence of judgment and national action". It is not known how they plan to achieve this when they refuse to share direct responsibility in many international crises. For instance, India and China have consistently refused to involve themselves in the quest for solutions to the Syrian civil war. They deem the Syrian crisis to be an internal matter stating that the "independence,

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territorial integrity and sovereignty" of Syria must be respected, "peaceful means" employed, the increasing violation of "human rights and international law" condemned and that the "deteriorating security and humanitarian situation" was worrisome ("Fifth BRICS Summit Declaration", Durban, South Africa, 26–27 March 2013, 2013, online at http://www.brics5.co.za). While the posture may be deemed appropriate and deserving appreciation it fails to mention concrete measures to end the crisis. BRICS merely looms like a pendulum swinging from one point to the other conveying a lack of convergence among members.

On Iran and Afghanistan as well, BRICS members have been divided. They uphold Iran's right to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as long as Tehran conforms to internationally abiding legal obligations. They have reiterated support for the resolution of any related misgivings via diplomatic means including dialogue between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (*ibid*). Simply put, BRICS has merely voiced Iran's long standing position on nuclear energy and displayed no creative imagination on ways to break the gridlock between Iran and the West on alleged nuclear weapon development activities. On Afghanistan, BRICS has been equally low-key. Despite the Afghan tragedy directly affecting three members—Russia, India and China—the organisation merely stated that it hopes to see Afghanistan become "peaceful, stable and democratic" as early as possible where religious "extremism and terrorism" are destroyed forever (*ibid*). The three members pursue individual interests in Afghanistan rather than making concerted efforts via the BRICS forum. Such actions do not display either acumen or seriousness to earn a better place on the world stage. It seems BRICS as an organised effort has started falling apart before taking off.

Far from leading from the front and by example BRICS is not even considered a leading organisation in its own backyard. Each faces antagonism—Argentina doubts and rejects Brazil's ability to lead South America and opposes Brazilian claims for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, Russia continues to evoke bitter memories of yesteryears in the hearts and minds of some of its neighbours aligned with the West and India's neighbours suspect it wants to have its cake and eat it too. China radiates a fear psychosis rather than friendly feelings and although South Africa may look like an oasis on the troubled continent, its ability to tackle even regional challenges is at a bare minimum. With such problems in their respective neighbourhoods, will BRICS members pull together for a better joint standing in the world? It is difficult to see how BRICS could overcome afflicting philosophical and structural complexities.