

Guest Editor's Introduction

Alexander Lukin

To cite this article: Alexander Lukin (2019) Guest Editor's Introduction, Strategic Analysis, 43:6, 451-455, DOI: [10.1080/09700161.2019.1671642](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1671642)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1671642>



Published online: 17 Dec 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Guest Editor's Introduction

Alexander Lukin

During November 13-14, 2019, the Brazilian capital hosted the eleventh annual BRICS Summit which was attended by the heads of state or heads of government of the five member states – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The first summit of the then BRIC (South Africa joined the group later, in 2010) was held at Yekaterinburg, Russia, exactly ten years ago.

BRICS is a relatively young group but has already become one of the most influential international associations. How did this happen? It seems that fundamental changes in the world system in the late 20th-early 21st centuries led to the emergence of BRICS and to the rapid growth of its influence.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s caused a fundamental change to the longstanding system of international relations that had been based on the confrontation between two centres of power. The Soviet Union's sudden departure from the scene left a vacuum. Although many states, even outside the Western world, disliked the Soviet Union and even criticized it, its absence left many states, especially larger ones, wary of a certain threat. That threat stemmed, first, from the instability in the international situation resulting from the end of a bipolar system that had guaranteed a certain order, and second, from the possibility that the one remaining centre of power—now freed from any external checks and balances—might encroach on the interests of others.

Thus, when the United States celebrated its victory in the Cold War and Francis Fukuyama declared the 'end of history,' China, India, Brazil and many other countries of Asia, Africa and South America viewed that development with some uneasiness.

These countries called for the democratization of international relations. In this context, that meant an equal role for all sovereign nations in deciding the future of the international system. In fact, this principle was the basis of the system of international law that emerged after the Second World War. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and its allies wanted to change this system and bring the entire world into their sphere of influence. The ideological cover for that strategy was the theory of globalization, as well as the concepts of universal (Western) values, 'the responsibility to protect,' etc. From this perspective, it was they who emerged as a revisionist force by calling for a revision of the post-Second World War system of international law, while the non-Western power centres played the role of conservatives.

It is quite ironic that the countries that boasted of being the most democratic in their internal politics fought against the democratization of the international system. This, however, is understandable since it was the more powerful political West (the US and

Alexander Lukin is Director of the Centre for East Asian and Shanghai Cooperation Studies at the Institute for International Studies, MGIMO-University, Moskva, Russia.

its allies) that felt constrained by the system of international law that had come into being during the period of its relative power parity with the Soviet camp. The West, therefore, saw this system—based as it was on the central role of sovereign states—as outdated after the Soviet camp disappeared. At the same time, all the other powers had felt protected by the old system and saw the Western idea of liberal international order as an attempt to create a world dominated by one power centre that could encroach on the interests of others.

For this reason, the disgruntled states began building bridges between each other. That cooperation was not initially directed against the West because all of the participants in that process were largely tied to the Western system and valued their collaboration with it. However, they looked for ways to coordinate their positions on those aspects of the new Western-dominated world that did not suit them. That desire led to the creation or strengthening of institutions and groups in which Western states did not participate: the SCO, the African Union, CELAC, SAARC, ASEAN and various formats associated with it, and, of course, BRICS.

Of these groups, BRICS—not formally an organization—has attracted the most interest. There are several reasons for this. First, the group brings together the largest and most influential non-Western countries. Second, it is not a regional but a global group that claims to represent the entire ‘South,’ or more broadly, the entire non-Western world. Third, BRICS actively puts forward its own initiatives as an alternative to Western projects for organizing the global economic and political order.

BRICS gains geopolitical significance by offering its own views on the processes at work in the world. Interestingly, Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neil, who coined the term ‘BRICs’, grouped the countries based on their economic similarities,¹ but the countries themselves borrowed the term and began cooperating based on geopolitical considerations. This can clearly be seen from the process of the group’s creation. Major non-Western states representing various continents where they were natural leaders joined BRICS such that it acquired its current form in stages. Its origin finds its roots in the two decades of Sino-Russian rapprochement that resulted from the two countries’ shared geopolitical interests. Without that, BRICS could hardly have come into being. Later, the RIC (Russia-China-India) cooperation model emerged, indicating that India had joined the process. The RIC group turned into BRIC by including Brazil (RIC formally still exists, but has become passive since the emergence of BRIC). The final step was turning BRIC into BRICS after the group was joined by South Africa.

BRICS gains geopolitical significance by offering its own views on the processes at work in the world. One of the main topics BRICS addresses is the need to reform the global economy. The BRICS member states strongly advocate increasing the representation of non-Western countries in international financial institutions. Towards this end, BRICS first emerged as a new pole within the G-20 representing the interests of the non-Western world and as an alternative to the G-7 (that became a purely Western club after Russia’s suspension from the G-8 in 2014).

However, this appeared to be not enough. The BRICS countries met with fierce resistance from the traditional masters of global finance. It was the disappointment that BRICS experienced in its attempt to reform the World Bank and IMF and to put them on more equitable footing that led the group to create its own development bank and pool of currency reserves. And, while these institutions might not offer a comprehensive alternative to existing international financial institutions, they should help correct their pro-

Western bias and provide non-Western states with an alternative when choosing the source for their financial development—and in the event of a serious economic crisis.

Thus, the reform of the global financial system is probably the most important of the group's four strategic interests. BRICS also pursues the goals of strengthening the central role of the UN Security Council in the international system, making maximum use of the complementary nature of the member states' economies in order to accelerate economic development, and modernizing the social sphere and economic life of those countries. As we can see, only some of these goals are purely economic in nature.

Speaking at a joint news conference by BRICS foreign ministers in 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov listed several major tasks before the BRICS countries: maintaining international peace and stability, developing the global economy and trade, pursuing common goals to strengthen their strategic partnership, and extending cooperation to the UN, G-20, the WTO and other international organizations. Most of these goals are geopolitical in nature and do not concern bilateral economic cooperation. Such BRICS activities as the meeting on the Middle East and Northern Africa in June 2018, and discussions of cyber security and the fight against terrorism indicate that geopolitics are also a major focus of the group.²

BRICS has turned from a 'hobby club' into a full-fledged mechanism of versatile strategic partnership. The leaders of the association hold two summits annually—the main summit and a meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 session—along with approximately 100 official events, including 20 at the ministerial level. There is a broad network of industry-specific contacts and cooperation between the BRICS countries involving their business communities, academics and other representatives of civil society. As Lavrov put it, BRICS 'has become an important factor in the emerging new polycentric, more just and democratic world order and plays a constructive role in promoting stability and security in our restless world.'³

Of course, the BRICS states differ greatly between each other and their disagreements with the West also have different historical and political roots. At the same time, however, they share several geopolitical and geo-economic goals that bring them closer together.

The five nations are committed to promoting indivisible security and international stability in all its dimensions, using collective methods of resolving crises by political and diplomatic methods, and by practicing multilateralism. They oppose armed interventions, unilateral economic measures of coercion, protectionism and unfair competition. The BRICS countries jointly advocate upholding the foundations of a multilateral trade system and the WTO's role as the only universal platform for drafting rules of global trade. The association is jointly searching for new sources of economic growth.⁴

The BRICS countries do not want to undermine the system of global governance but favour changing it so that the non-Western world has greater influence over it. The attitude of mainstream Chinese analysts towards the idea of 'global governance' is very indicative in this respect. Although Beijing considers current global governance theory and practice to be a Western scheme designed to protect US and European dominance around the world, China does not want to undermine or scrap that system, but overhaul it to give China and other non-Western states proper representation and say in it.⁵ The correctness of this interpretation was confirmed at the highest level. Speaking in September 2016 at a study session for members of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee that was devoted to global governance, China's leader Xi Jinping said: 'We must actively participate in global governance. We will assume greater international responsibilities, and in so doing, we will try our best but not overreach ourselves.'⁶

Interestingly, even some in the US understand this. A recent RAND Corporation study on sustainable international order concluded: ‘Challengers to the order, notably Russia and China, do not seek to destroy it so much as gain additional influence in its operation ... Revisionist pressure against the order today is not as much opposed to the idea of multilateral rules and institutions *per se* as it is to US hegemony over key aspects of the order. If the United States clings too tightly to a particular vision of specific norms, it is likely to accelerate the order’s decay.’⁷

This Special Issue is an attempt to study BRICS not just as a phenomenon of world economy or even global governance, but in the context of the changing international system and as one of the pillars of the emerging polycentric global order. The articles of the issue are divided into two parts. The first consists of in-depth analyses of the group within the general international context. Professor Richard Sakwa of the University of Kent sees BRICS as part of an emerging international phenomenon that he defines as ‘sovereign internationalism.’ Professor Cynthia Roberts from the Political Science Department of City University of New York’s Hunter College and Moscow’s MGIMO University Research Fellows Igor Denisov, Andrei Kazantsev, Ivan Safranchuk and a Research Professor from Russia’s Higher School of Economics (HSE) give their respective (and very different) perspectives on the role of BRICS in the context of the renewed great power competition. Dr Li Li from China’s Tsinghua University concludes that, although the BRICS member countries share some interests as emerging economies, they will play an important but rather limited role in transforming the world order. Ninel Seniuk, an economist from Russia’s Higher School of Economics, analyses the role and place of BRICS countries in global value chains. Igor Kovalev and Alina Sherbakova of the same university discuss the progress and prospects for BRICS cooperation in science and technology. Finally, Anastasia Likhacheva analyses the importance of water problems to the prospects for BRICS cooperation.

The articles in the second part present various national and regional perspectives of BRICS from both member countries and other important international actors. Director General of the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) based in New Delhi, Professor Sachin Chaturvedi and Assistant Professor at RIS Sabyasachi Saha, provide an Indian perspective on the role of BRICS’ economic cooperation for global governance and institution-building. Federal University of Rio de Janeiro’s Associate Professor Alexander Zhebit writes about the changes in Brazil’s approach to BRICS under the administration of President Bolsonaro. Dmitry Novikov and Andrei Skriba of the Higher School of Economics analyse new trends in Moscow’s approach to BRICS. Maxim Bratersky and Georgy Kutyrev of the same university examine the evolution of the Russia-India-China Security Agenda amidst the changing international situation and growing US unilateralism. In addition, HSE visiting Chinese scholar Fan Xuesong and I look at Beijing’s changing attitude towards BRICS. University of South Africa researchers Francis A. Kornegay and Sanusha Naidu present their country’s perspective for the role of BRICS in the Post-Liberal World Order. Professor Vitaly Kozyrev of Endicott College (USA) writes about Washington’s ‘America First’ global strategy under President Trump and its implications for BRICS. Lastly, Dr Elena Maslova from MGIMO University and Professor Mark Entin from Moscow State Institute of International Relations, analyse the controversial BRICS-EU relations using Italy as a case study.

Not only do the authors in this Special Issue hail from a wide variety of BRICS and non-BRICS countries, each presents an entirely unique point of view. When brought together in a single volume, the result forms a comprehensive and valuable analysis of

the BRICS phenomenon and its role in international politics and economics. It is a must-read for all students of BRICS. It will also be of interest to anybody studying international relations, changes in the world order and global governance, and the foreign policies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, the US and the EU.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded through the MGIMO University's [Project Number 1921-01-02].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Jim O'Neill, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs", Global Economics Paper No. 66, Goldman Sachs, New York, November 30, 2001 at <https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf> (Accessed September 18, 2019).
2. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference by BRICS foreign ministers following their meeting", Pretoria, June 4, 2018 at http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3248286 (Accessed September 18, 2019).
3. Sergey Lavrov, no. 2.
4. "Comment by the Information and Press Department on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in the BRICS Foreign Ministers Meeting", June 3, 2018 at http://www.mid.ru/en/vizity-ministra/-/asset_publisher/ICoYBGcCUgTR/content/id/3247301 (Accessed September 18, 2019).
5. Pang Zhongying and Wang Ruiping, "Quanqiu zhili: Zhongguode zhanlüe yingdui" ["Global Governance: China's Strategic Response"], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, 2013, No. 4, at http://www.ciis.org.cn/gyzz/2013-07/23/content_6145818.htm . (Accessed September 18, 2019).
6. "Xi calls for reforms on global governance", September 29, 2016 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/29/content_26931697.htm . (Accessed September 18, 2019).
7. Michael J. Mazarr, "We Need a New International Order. Here's Why", June 25, 2018 at <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/06/we-need-a-new-international-order-heres-why.html> (Accessed September 18, 2019).