



Theoretical Perspectives on BRICS: What Kind of an International Institution Is It?

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BRICS has always been an “uncomfortable” or exceptional case for IR (International Relations) theorists. Theories which they have tried to apply to the study of BRICS as an institution or its international activities worked poorly or did not work at all. Scholars who want to apply Western theories to BRICS often have to justify this against claims that BRICS is *sui generis*, and that empirical knowledge of BRICS’ current policies is far more important to understand this grouping’s international behavior than any theoretical sophistication. However, as we know from the history of science, it is useless and counterproductive to contrapose

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theory to empirical knowledge; ideally, they should go hand in hand, and support each other.

It should be noted that very few works try to interpret BRICS theoretically as an embryo of an alternative economic and political world order (2014b; De Coning et al., 2015; Fulquet, 2015; Konyshev et al., 2017; Sergunin, 2020; Sergunin & Gao, 2018; Sergunin et al., 2020; Stuenkel, 2014a).

Numerous theoretical questions remain unanswered: Is BRICS just another institution of interstate cooperation which fits into a system of already existing structures, or is it a fundamentally different mode of international relations that can seriously change the present-day world politics? What drives BRICS countries' policies? Can the BRICS group become an alternative to the domination of the Western powers, which is formalized in the present system of international institutions and regimes? Will this institution provide fundamentally new conditions which may lead to the development of international cooperation as opposed to power politics pursued by the U.S. and its allies? Can BRICS be considered a new mechanism of global governance, or is it nothing more than a temporary/short-lived intergovernmental arrangement?

Without setting out to attack all the above questions, this study examines how the main IR theories interpret the BRICS phenomenon. The goal is not only to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of these theories, but also to identify their heuristic potential for studying such a complex phenomenon as BRICS.

This study is based on the assumption that BRICS is a promising integration association which so far has no formalized institutional or organizational nature and which is therefore best understood as an intergovernmental discussion forum rather than a full-fledged international organization. However, BRICS has every chance of becoming an influential institution of global governance, albeit playing by rules different from those imposed on the international system by the most powerful Western states.

It should be noted that among many IR theories dealing with the study of international institutions, we selected only those that, on the one hand, are the most influential within their respective IR paradigms and, on the other, represent the most interesting conceptual interpretations of BRICS.

NEOREALISM

The power transition theory (PTT), first proposed by A. F. K. Organski (1958), is the most popular theoretical approach to the study of the BRICS phenomenon among neorealists. PTT is based on the assumption that changes in power balance in world politics happen systematically. This theory believes that conflicts and wars are normally the results of the growing influence of states competing with the dominant powers. In this regard, all states are divided into two groups: those which support the status quo, and “revisionists.” Powerful and influential states, such as the U.S., enjoy the advantages of the established world order and fall into the status quo category, while states dissatisfied with their place and role in the international relations system are considered revisionists. According to PTT, the latter favor radical changes in the existing international order. In this sense, Russia and China are the primary candidates for the revisionist powers, while Brazil, India, and South Africa are perceived by PTT as the states with “moderate” revisionist ambitions (mostly of a regional character, although Brazil and India have some global aspirations such as their intention to become permanent members of the UN Security Council) (Carafano, 2015; Cheng, 2016; Granholm et al., 2014, pp. 10, 26–29).

While revisionist powers are viewed as a source of destabilization for the international system, and their activities are automatically associated with negative consequences, the dominant (status quo) states perform protective functions within the system, and thus their behavior is conversely considered positive. Paradoxically, from this point of view, cases such as the NATO military intervention in Kosovo (1999) which led to the final collapse of Yugoslavia, U.S. ballistic missile defense system deployment in Europe, NATO’s eastward expansion, Western sponsorship of a series of “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, bullying Iran, American military assistance to Taiwan, the U.S. navy’s regular demonstration of the free navigation principle in the South China Sea, etc., cannot be seen as “revisionist” acts and do not pose a threat to Russia, PRC, or anyone (Carafano, 2015).

Despite its popularity among neorealists, PTT is the subject of criticism both from the neorealist and competing IR paradigms. This theory was more applicable to the period of the Cold War, when two superpowers were interested in maintaining the status quo given the threat of mutual

destruction in the event of nuclear war. The present-day international relations system, including its structure, is still in its formative phase. In this context, PTT can explain little about the BRICS states' behavior.

Moreover, PTT does not take into account the existence of a third type of state: reformist states, which do not fully agree with the existing international relations system, but prefer not to radically change the "rules of the game." Instead, they try to adapt these rules to dynamic changes in the world order to make them fairer and more comfortable for all members of the international community. Quite often, these states do not behave as revisionists, but rather they favor the status quo by demanding that the previously established "rules of the game" and international legal norms should be observed. For example, the BRICS countries firmly oppose any attempts to revise the UN Charter regarding the use of military force as well as the principles of inviolability of state sovereignty and noninterference in the internal affairs of sovereign states (as opposed to the Western doctrine of "humanitarian intervention") (Konyshev et al., 2015; Sergunin, 2010).

At the same time, the BRICS countries are unhappy with the current order of things, in which a small group of highly developed countries dominates and tries to impose its rules on the rest of the world. These countries would like to change the existing world order, but in an evolutionary rather than radical (revolutionary) way, which justifies considering them reformist rather than revisionist powers (Hansen & Sergunin, 2015). The BRICS countries are also striving to cultivate an image of themselves not as spoilers or revisionists, but as reformers of the existing unfair international relations system. For instance, they are trying to create alternative financial institutions that would help prevent a new global financial and economic crisis (Mikhailenko, 2016).

As recent BRICS documents show, this forum also assumes responsibility in other areas of world politics—the environment, the fight against the negative effects of climate change, international terrorism, transnational organized crime, cybercrime, and the reform of leading international organizations, including the UN (BRICS, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). In general, the BRICS countries demonstrate their willingness to build a more efficient model of the world order, trying to do this in a non-confrontational way (Mikhailenko, 2016).

To sum up, if PTT supporters want this theory to better fit into the present-day realities and retain its explanatory power, they need to revise

the typology of states they use and supplement it with a new (“reformist”) type of powers.

NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberal IR theorists believe that the BRICS phenomenon can be better explained by the soft power concept. They underline that, in contrast with the Cold War era, when many countries preferred to rely on hard (military) power, nowadays soft power instruments are more effective. The neoliberals note that the soft power strategy is attractive to BRICS countries for a number of reasons. First, it can help them overcome their negative image in the international arena, the image that resulted from their systematic involvement in a series of international conflicts (Russia versus Georgia and Ukraine; China versus its neighbors in the South China Sea; India versus Pakistan and China; South Africa versus Angola and Namibia). Second, the soft power arsenal can also be helpful in diversifying BRICS countries’ methods of geopolitical and geoeconomic expansion and making these methods more effective.

Some specifics in the BRICS countries’ interpretation of the soft power concept should be noted. First and foremost, the BRICS States interpret soft power differently from its initial meaning advanced by Joseph Nye, who defined soft power as the power of attraction. In reality, however, BRICS (especially Russian and Chinese) soft power policies are often dominated by pragmatic interests rather than the aim to be attractive for other countries. For this reason, such soft power strategies do not always take into account international partners’ preferences. In Nye’s view, this is often unacceptable to BRICS countries’ partners and may even provoke a hostile reaction to their soft power initiatives (Nye, 2013).

As some experts rightly note, BRICS’ reading of the soft power concept is much broader than Nye’s one. Nye (2004) believed that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies which should be attractive to foreign partners. BRICS theorists, however, tend to include into the soft power problematique everything which cannot be attributed to the hard (military) security agenda. In other words, for BRICS countries, the soft power concept is synonymous to the soft (non-military) security concept which includes not only diplomatic and socio-cultural components (as according to Nye) but also other elements such as, for example, economic and/or financial power (2013b; Sergunin & Karabeshkin,

2015; Tsygankov, 2013a). The latter was unacceptable for Nye, who believed that economic and financial instruments can be tools of coercion and payment rather than attraction.

Furthermore, for BRICS theorists, soft power is an umbrella concept which covers other closely related concepts—public diplomacy, peoples' diplomacy, the humanitarian dimension of politics and NGO-diplomacy. Among soft power instruments, economic and financial tools, cultural cooperation, ethnic diasporas, and educational and religious institutions are preferable methods for the BRICS countries. The BRICS states established special bodies for soft power implementation: for example, China's Confucius Institutes, Russia's Rossotrudnichestvo (agency for cooperation with compatriots abroad), "Russian World," Gorchakov and Andrei Pervozvanny foundations, and others.

It should be also noted that BRICS' interpretations of the soft power concept are rather instrumentalist. For these states, the soft power potential is just one of many tools to protect their national interests, which should be used pragmatically and, if necessary, in combination with other methods, including coercive ones.

In these countries, soft power policy is controlled and directed to a large extent by the government, and this makes it less flexible and effective. In Nye's (2013) opinion, Russia and China made a mistake by underestimating the importance of civil society's institutes and initiatives; for instance, on the other hand, in the U.S. the main sources of soft power are universities, NGOs, and cinema and pop culture rather than the government. According to Nye, the state should multiply the effect of the civil society's activities rather than limit them.

However, it would be wrong to depict BRICS soft power strategies as a complete failure. Along with some shortcomings, these strategies have certain achievements and competitive advantages. For example, BRICS managed to successfully demonstrate the inclusive nature of its cooperative format. The BRICS countries are located on different continents and have different political systems, levels of economic development, histories, and cultural traditions. However, BRICS shows that different countries are able to overcome old conflicts, negative historical experiences, and mutual misperceptions, and successfully cooperate in a mutually beneficial way.

Moreover, India, China, and Russia have long histories and unique cultures which have substantially enriched world culture and still remain very attractive for other nations.

Generally speaking, BRICS countries use soft power in their own way, trying to avoid copying the Western experience and going beyond Nye's "narrow" interpretation of the soft power concept. In practical terms, they stick to an instrumentalist and pragmatic approach to the use of soft power which is oriented to the promotion and protection of national interests rather than accounting for international partners' preferences.

At the same time, BRICS countries have a tremendous soft power potential which could strengthen their international positions if it is properly used. On a number of occasions, BRICS countries demonstrated successful use of the soft power arsenal: China's economic, financial, and cultural expansion in South-East Asia, Africa, and Latin America; Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative; Russia's rather successful integrationist projects in the post-Soviet space (Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization), etc.

THE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE CONCEPT

Historically, the peaceful coexistence concept was and is one of the distinctive characteristics of Russia's, India's, and China's foreign policies, although Moscow and New Delhi have not used it in their official vocabularies since the end of the Cold War. It was developed—in various forms—by representatives of neoliberalism, globalism, and neorealism.

This concept dominated Soviet foreign policy thinking not only in the times of its author Vladimir Lenin but also in the post-World War II period, including Mikhail Gorbachev's "perestroika," (restructuring). However, it turned out that with the end of the Cold War the concept was no longer interesting to the Russian political class, partly because of its Marxist-Leninist connotations, and also because in the 1990s Moscow aimed to integrate Russia to the world capitalist economic and political systems rather than coexist with them. The concept itself thus disappeared from Russian doctrinal documents.

China, in contrast with Russia, never abandoned the peaceful coexistence concept and elevated it to the status of a fundamental international relations principle after the 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo. China suggested peaceful coexistence as an alternative concept to American "neo-interventionism."

In India, the peaceful coexistence concept was transformed from its initial version (*Pancha Chila* or "Five Principles") into the *Vasudhaiva*

Kutumbakam concept (“the whole world as one family”) which rejected the very idea of hegemony (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2015).

In formal terms, Brazil’s foreign policy doctrinal documents stopped mentioning the peaceful coexistence concept in the 1960s; however, the state’s real international policies were in line with this principle (Abdenur, 2015).

In South Africa, the peaceful coexistence principle in the form of the *Ubuntu* concept was formally acknowledged in the 2011 White Paper on foreign policy. This concept was defined as “respect for all States, nations and cultures,” while the understanding of national security was based on the acknowledgment of the priority of human security (Mandrup & Smith, 2015).

It should be noted that, presently, the peaceful coexistence concept has a different meaning as compared to the Cold War era, as the antagonistic confrontation between the two sociopolitical systems—capitalism and socialism—has ended. The BRICS countries do not aim to defeat the global capitalist system as was the case with socialist states in the past. They just want integration into the world economy and global governance systems on an equal basis. In geopolitical terms, Russia has lost its superpower status and cannot compete with other poles of power as it could previously, while other BRICS countries try to avoid global confrontation with the U.S. altogether.

The updated interpretation of the peaceful coexistence concept by the BRICS countries can be summarized as follows:

countries with different economic and sociopolitical systems can coexist peacefully;
 the dominance of one or several countries in world politics is unacceptable;
 preference should be given to the soft power tools, while military force should be used only as a last resort, on the exceptional level;
 despite the numerous divergences with the West, the BRICS countries have a broad cooperative agenda with the U.S., EU, Japan, NATO, and other Western-led institutions that includes weapons of mass destruction non-proliferation; arms control and disarmament; conflict prevention and resolution; fighting international terrorism and transnational crime; environment protection and climate change mitigation; civil protection; outer space and world ocean research; humanitarian and cultural cooperation, etc.

It should be noted, however, that the peaceful coexistence concept cannot embrace the entire complexity and diversity of BRICS and its international activities. This partly sheds light on the motivation and certain features of “the five” in the international arena, but it cannot give a full explanation as to why these countries have united into a group, and what long-term strategic goals they pursue. It also cannot explain where the limitations of the peaceful coexistence policy are, beyond which the BRICS countries are willing to resort to force, and what factors induce them to take such sometimes risky steps (De Coning, 2015; Sergunin, 2016).

POSTPOSITIVISM

There are two main postpositivist schools that try to explain the BRICS phenomenon from different theoretical viewpoints.

Status theories. Being rooted in psychology, status theories are also used by social sciences, including IR theory. They are particularly useful for explaining those cases in which the BRICS countries’ policies seem emotional, irrational, and unpredictable. Such policies do not fit into the theories built on the principles of rationalism, including the PTT, peaceful coexistence, and soft power concepts. Status theories address policy motives related to self-esteem, reputation, honor and dignity, fame, sympathy, and other emotional and psychological categories that introduce an element of unpredictability into the political behavior of leaders, social groups, and states.

In terms of status-seeking strategies, states seeking to improve their international standing may try to pass into a higher-status group of states (mobility strategy), compete with the dominant group (competition strategy), or achieve preeminence in a different domain (creativity strategy) (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). The choice of one type of strategy over another depends on the openness of the status hierarchy as well as the values of the status-seeker and established powers.

For example, since the end of the Cold War, the BRICS states have embarked on liberal democratic reforms to enter the economic and political institutions of the West, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the Council of Europe, and the G7. At the same time, the closed nature of organizations such as the OECD, EU, or NATO prompted China and Russia to move to a strategy of competition (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010).

On the path of creative strategy, Russia is trying to rely on the neoconservative ideas of collectivism, spirituality, and orthodoxy as opposed to the individualism, materialism, and liberal morality of the West (Sergunin, 2014). Creativity is also produced by charismatic leaders at the level of “grand” diplomacy. For example, due to these qualities, President Vladimir Putin has managed to achieve international fruition of his September 2015 plan to destroy Syrian chemical weapons and thus avoid U.S. military intervention in this country. The “New Silk Road” concept of another charismatic leader, Xi Jinping, was perceived as a Eurasian economic integration project that could be mutually beneficial for all its participants.

Despite their attractiveness, status theories still leave a number of important questions unanswered. For example, the question about status indicators (which should help in measuring a state’s international rating) should be clarified. It is also important to clarify the question of when status becomes more important than material interests. In terms of content, the question of which instruments—peaceful or coercive—the state uses to change its status is of great importance. As for the internal aspects of the status-seeking strategies, it is necessary to examine the extent to which domestic political institutions can influence the growth or reduction of the feeling of status inconsistency/underachievement in their society. These questions status theories have yet to answer.

Theory of “Global Regionalism.” BRICS is unique because it does not represent a typical geographical region consisting of a set of states that are geographically close to each other and form a single historical, economic, political, and socio-cultural community (or at least seek to create such a community). According to the theory of “new regionalism” (Lagutina, 2009; Lagutina & Vasilieva, 2012; Acharya, 2014; Hettne et al., 1999; van Langenhove, 2011), BRICS belongs to the category of the so-called “global regions” which are based on functional, network-type, identity, multi-actor, and multifactor principles rather than on geographic proximity. Such regions have a cross-cutting nature: they easily permeate various levels—local, regional, and global—to create a completely different type of world politics. In addition to BRICS, such global regions include, for example, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Mercado Común del Sur, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Arctic.

Supporters of the global regionalism theory believe that during its existence BRICS has managed to form a common transnational agenda.

Among the most important areas of the BRICS countries' cooperation are the following: improvement of the global financial system; development of industrial and commercial relations; energy security; cooperation in the field of climate change and environmental protection; joint research projects; the fight against cyber terrorism; and coordination of these countries' activities in international organizations, including the UN and its specialized agencies.

In support of this global agenda, BRICS created a number of its own financial institutions, such as the New Development Bank with a capital of \$100 billion and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (\$100 billion as well). In 2013, China has launched the New Silk Road (or Belt and Road) initiative. At first, it was aimed at the development of a land transport corridor through the territory of Eurasia. It was then supplemented by sea routes from East Asia to Europe, both in southern (through the Suez Canal) and northern (Northern Sea Route) directions. In the end, the project has acquired a truly global dimension, incorporating the Asia-Pacific region and South America, where one of the BRICS members is located (Brazil).

At the same time, critics of the global regionalism theory note that in the framework of BRICS, a truly unified agenda has not yet emerged. With rare exceptions, most of the cooperative ties within BRICS are bilateral, not multilateral. In addition, there are numerous differences between the members of this international group. Particularly, there are serious disagreements between India and China, including territorial disputes between them, that regularly lead to direct military-political confrontation. Opponents of this theory believe that it is too early to speak of BRICS as a whole community comparable with other integration entities. For this reason, BRICS is not yet able to play a truly influential role either in world politics or the global economy.

CONCLUSIONS

Various IR theories offer their explanations of the BRICS phenomenon, including the sources of this assembly, motives for its member-states' behavior, and the role that this group plays in present-day world politics and the global economy. Speaking about the relative value or explanatory power of each of these theories, it seems that they often complement

rather than exclude each other. Together, on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach, they form the foundation for studying a complex politico-economic phenomenon such as BRICS.

The newest IR theories (postpositivist schools) tend to hold that, along with the pursuit of purely material and pragmatic interests (hedging financial and economic risks in the era of globalization, developing joint industrial and infrastructure projects, counterbalancing Western expansionism, solving various common problems ranging from environmental protection to fighting international terrorism and transnational crime), the BRICS countries are actively using this forum to strengthen their positions on the world stage and elevate their international statuses.

In their status-seeking policies, the BRICS member-states apply various methods—from the mobility and competition strategies to different types of creativity. These foreign policy strategies have had some effect, with the exception of Russia whose international reputation has suffered because of the Ukrainian crisis. In general, most of the BRICS countries have managed to create an image of themselves as constructive and peaceful states, preferring cooperation to confrontation while respecting international rules and their international partners. Even for Russia, participation in BRICS has proved to be very useful from a reputational/status point of view. Since the BRICS countries did not support Western sanctions against Moscow, Russia managed not only to avoid complete international isolation, but also to actively influence international developments, both regionally and globally.

In general, BRICS has managed to shape its image as an alternative model of world order based on principles and rules of interstate cooperation which exclude discriminatory and hierarchical types of relations. It is too early to say that a fundamentally new type of international relations or international institution has been created within the BRICS framework, but, undoubtedly, some positive experience has been accumulated by this association. It is safe to assume that in the foreseeable future the BRICS phenomenon will remain a subject of the closest attention from IR theorists.

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