

# **BRICS: Sovereignty power and weakness**

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## **Abstract**

The BRICS' impact can be evaluated based on the degree of political coherence among them, as well as their capacity to influence the international system. This article will from the outset assume that the BRICS form a hetero-geneous coalition of often competing powers that share a common fundamental political objective: to erode Western hegemonic claims by protecting the principle which these claims are deemed to most threaten, namely the political sovereignty of states. The BRICS form a coalition of sovereign state defenders. While they do not seek to form an anti-Western political coalition based on a counter-proposal or radically different vision of the world, they are concerned with maintaining their independence of judgment and national action in a world that is increasingly economically and socially interdependent. They consider that state sovereignty trumps all, including, of course, the political nature of its underpinning regimes. Thus, the BRICS – even the democratic ones – fundamentally diverge from the liberal vision of Western countries.

## **Introduction**

Whether we like it or not, the BRICS are now part of the global geopolitical landscape. It remains to be seen whether this evolving geopolitical acronym – since, in 2011, South Africa was added to the initial group consisting of Brazil, India, Russia and China – is able to structurally impact the global system (Van der Merwe, 2011). Structural impact refers to the ability to shape one's identity or future configuration. Regarding identity this consists of proposing, for example, a competing global narrative to that of the West ('the world is multipolar and state sovereignty is one of its essential features'). With regard to balance of power, it involves changing the agenda, direction, standing

requirements and collective decision-making of the international community in sensitive areas (multilateral trade negotiations, International Monetary Fund reform, Security Council and United Nations reform, completion of climate negotiations, implementation of the resolution on the responsibility to protect). The BRICS' impact can be evaluated based on the degree of political coherence among them, as well as their capacity to influence the international system. This article will from the outset assume that the BRICS form a heterogeneous coalition of often competing powers that share a common fundamental political objective: to erode Western hegemonic claims by protecting the principle which these claims are deemed to most threaten, namely the political sovereignty of states. The BRICS form a coalition of sovereign state defenders. While they do not seek to form an anti-Western political coalition based on a counter-proposal or radically different vision of the world, they are concerned with maintaining their independence of judgment and national action in a world that is increasingly economically and socially interdependent.<sup>1</sup> They consider that state sovereignty trumps all, including, of course, the political nature of its underpinning regimes. Thus, the BRICS – even the democratic ones – fundamentally diverge from the liberal vision of Western countries.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this defensively strong coalition remains weak on the offensive precisely because the sovereign states that form it pursue narrow national objectives. Since they are very distrustful of one another for a number of reasons, of which some are historical (Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian rivalry) and others more recent (the Chinese rise), the BRICS have trouble interpreting sovereignty as anything other than a zero-sum game, including among themselves. This narrow attachment to sovereignty is both their strength and their great weakness. As one Indian diplomat said: 'The BRICS grouping has economic heft, but their political clout is yet to be tested. They don't see eye to eye on many international issues. There is no common cementing principle among them. They have made all the right noises at the summit, but each country will have to make its own calculations as to how far they can defy the United States' (Iiyashenko and Sedov, 2012).

That is precisely what this article will try to show using two issues as examples: the attitude of the BRICS when the selection began for a new head of the IMF, as well as their attitudes during the Arab revolutions. These two examples are complementary. They illustrate the BRICS' attachment to the issue of sovereignty and their difficulty in moving from negative solidarity to positive solidarity; as a result the BRICS either adopt strictly national – and therefore contradictory – positions, or develop purely defensive positions. The commitment to narrow national interests limits the practice of active solidarity among the BRICS.

## **The BRICS: A Product of Globalization and the Iraq War**

The BRICS find themselves in two dynamics that are progressing in confluence: one is economic, and the other is more strategic. The economic dynamic is obviously the product of globalization. It is the one that led investment bank Goldman Sachs to note for the first time in November 2001 – two months after September 11 – the emergence of four countries (Brazil, India, China and Russia) with economic growth rates that have now surpassed those of the G7 countries (Goldman Sachs, 2001). The Goldman Sachs study highlighted the gap between the official measure of wealth (nominal GNP) and wealth relative to purchasing power (purchasing power parity). According to the first measure, the BRICS only account for 8 per cent of global GNP. With the second, they reach 23 per cent (Goldman Sachs, 2001). Ten years after the first BRICS study, the figures largely confirm initial forecasts. Their contribution to global growth is impressive: 36 per cent (Wilson *et al*, 2010). The estimate for 2020 is 49 per cent, meaning they will collectively account for a third of global GNP (Wilson *et al*, 2010). The BRICS are heirs to the globalized economy and accordingly staunch supporters of an open economy and determined adversaries of any economic protectionism, especially since the 2008–2009 financial crisis. The fact that the concept of BRICS was created by an investment bank, while that of the Third World was formed by a demographer (Alfred Sauvy) reveals how much economic globalization has come to shape geopolitical representations.

While the BRICS are the product of economic globalization, they are not limited to it. At the same time– and this is what makes them original – they are in a way the product of September 11 and the war in Iraq. The latter highlighted the superpower of the United States along with the inability of the rest of the world to oppose it (Pape, 2005). The first Gulf War in 1991 had already made this imbalance evident, but the stakes were different at the time. Whether the 1991 war was a pretext to reaffirm the US presence in the Middle East does not change the fact that Iraq had indeed violated the sovereignty of a state that was independent and recognized as such by the international community. The context in 2003 was very different. In this case, the political sovereignty of the Iraqi state was challenged on the basis of a redoubtable principle: preemptive war (Jervis, 2003). The Bush Doctrine, which propounded preemption, was deeply traumatic for all the emerging countries. They more or less explicitly reasoned that the United States would not hesitate to use force against any country that might thwart its interests. The BRICS themselves were obviously not directly exposed to this kind of threat. But as powers emerging on the global scene and claiming influence on it, they had to be wary of the Bush administration's armed messianic thrust. These concerns were somewhat dispelled with the advent of the Obama administration,

but the wariness remains. The Brazilians for instance had expressed concern about the United States' Plan Colombia in 2009,<sup>3</sup> and once again raised the issue of the purpose of US air bases in the Amazon during President Obama's visit to Brasilia in 2011.<sup>4</sup> Brasilia wanted to ensure that these bases were not logistical support for possible American military interventions outside of Colombia.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Brazilian diplomats constantly refer back to the Iraqi case, especially to justify their country's refusal to pursue sanctions against Iran. For Brazil, as for the other emerging countries, the application of sanctions is but the prelude to war.<sup>5</sup>

The political crystallization that led to the emergence of the BRICS occurred in 2003, even if it was chronologically preceded by the creation of IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa). In January 2003, at the inauguration of new Brazilian President Lula, South African President Mbeki pitched to his counterpart the idea of creating a group comprising Brazil, South Africa and India, to engage in dialogue with the G8 countries ahead of the June Evian Summit, to which these three countries had been invited by Jacques Chirac less than two months after the invasion of Iraq (de Souza, 2009b). Two topics were on the agenda: the Iraq war and WTO multilateral negotiations. This initiative was very favorably received by both India and Brazil since, no sooner had the Evian Summit ended than the three countries met again in Brasilia to sign the declaration to create IBSA (IBSA, 2003). The three countries portrayed themselves as multi-ethnic, multicultural and democratic emerging powers.<sup>6</sup> The BRICS obviously could not claim to share a common orientation with regard to the nature of the Russian and Chinese regimes. They were not bound by democracy, but by the desire to democratize the international system.<sup>7</sup> The idea was that the regional hegemons cooperate to pool their strength in the various multilateral negotiating forums (Alden and Vieira, 2005; Beri, 2008).

This new alliance did not take long to politically manifest itself in a forceful and spectacular way at the 2003 WTO summit in Cancun. No political player explicitly referred to the BRICS at the time since Russia was not, and still is not, a WTO member.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, at the conference three BRICS (India, China and Brazil), with the assistance of other emerging countries – after care was taken to exclude Australia – joined forces to scuttle the Doha round agreement that the Europeans and Americans had secretly prepared. This blockade stemmed from these three countries' refusal to ratify a reduction in American and European agricultural subsidies that was considered patently insufficient by emerging countries. But the opposition rapidly politicized. At the purely trade-related level, India and China were reluctant to reach an agreement simply because they did not want to liberalize their industrial sectors any faster or further. They seized on the insufficient Euro-American concessions on agricultural subsidies as a pretext to block an agreement. Brazil's position was different: it had a much greater interest than India or

China in reaching an agreement because the liberalization of the European and American agricultural markets was a top political priority. In addition to deeming Euro-American concessions insufficient, Brazil was not unhappy to show Western countries that emerging countries were no longer willing to accept WTO governance based on preliminary agreement between the United States and the European Union.<sup>9</sup> Thus, India, Brazil and China did not share the same trade interests. At the political level, however, they benefited from ending the Euro-American condominium over the WTO. Western countries underestimated this aspect by writing off the alliance between Brazil, China and India as only circumstantial, given their different interests within the international trade system. This alliance did in fact prove to be substantively circumstantial, but nonetheless had significant political consequences to the extent that it helped to change WTO governance. It may be said that the WTO has become much more democratic, and the Europeans and Americans are evidently no longer the only key players. The failure of the 2008 negotiations, which could have led to the completion of the Doha round, demonstrated the ambivalence of these two results. On the one hand, it confirmed the new position of emerging countries in the multilateral trade system, since India (and the United States) was the source of opposition to finalizing the agreement. On the other, India and China's refusal to reach an agreement thwarted the interests of Brazil, which remains committed to a successful conclusion of negotiations.<sup>10</sup>

The Cancun experience had great political significance because it revealed the emerging countries' capacity to agree on a defensive political agenda in relation to the West, despite their diverging long-term interests. Two different dynamics thus gradually converged: at one end IBSA, the product of classical coalition-building among certain emerging states to advance South-South cooperation, and at the other BRICS, which began as a title invented by an investment bank, but then gradually built itself into a political coalition. The BRICS have acquired much greater political visibility than IBSA, but this is certainly not due to greater institutionalization. It is quite the contrary. While IBSA produced six regular ministerial meetings among its members beginning in 2003, the first BRICS summit did not take place until Russia took the initiative in 2009. The political recognition of BRICS is greater than that of IBSA simply because the former group includes China and Russia. While IBSA brings together mid-sized emerging powers, BRICS is a much more political group that includes two permanent members of the Security Council, three nuclear powers and two non-democratic powers. BRICS has been much more difficult to institutionalize than IBSA precisely because the former's ability to develop a common agenda has been, and continues to be, more difficult.

In any event, the economic and financial crisis in 2008–2009 affirmed the prominent role played by emerging countries in the international system more

than ever before. Without them, the recession would have been deeper. This fact substantiated what Goldman Sachs forecasted a decade ago: the huge growth potential of these countries. Accordingly, a whole series of demands made by the BRICS, such as the democratization of the international system, were echoed and materialized in the G20. The BRICS nonetheless view the creation of this new club with ambiguity. While it offers the advantage of opening the system by reorienting the global balance of power in a direction more favorable to emerging countries, it also dissolves their specific identity. That is the central issue: how can the BRICS justify their existence as such when so many other emerging powers exist in the world, such as Mexico in Latin America, Turkey in the Middle East and Indonesia in Asia<sup>11</sup>? Upon its creation, IBSA had emphasized the multiethnic, multicultural and democratic character of its members. This definition cannot be applied to the BRICS. One might assume that the BRICS draw their legitimacy from the fact that they bring together regional powers that have set their political ambitions on the international scene. But in this case, why not include Turkey? In the end, are the BRICS just creating a form of emerging aristocracy looking to be coopted by developed countries to the detriment of rival countries? Is this but a coalition of contenders for a permanent seat on the Security Council? In attempting to answer these questions, it becomes apparent that the answers are not so simple and that the BRICS must reckon with undeniable internal contradictions.

### **Russia: An Atypical Actor in the Club**

We will begin with Russia, the BRICS' most atypical actor. It is not an emerging power, strictly speaking, but rather a former superpower eager to regain a part of the political status it lost in the aftermath of the Cold War. To this end, Russia can draw on several assets. One is its legacy as a great world power under the tsars and communists. This is a significant asset because it makes it much easier for Russia than for the other global players to project itself on the global stage, to hold a view on most key issues, to have a substantial diplomatic corps and to uninhibitedly voice its views on the world stage. These assets would of course lose their relevance in the absence of material power, but there is always a time lag between the loss of power and of its formal attributes. Compared with the other BRICS, Russia holds an ambivalent or even ambiguous position. The BRICS form a coalition that allows Russia to exist in a broader group when interacting with the West. It is no coincidence that Moscow was most willing to politicize the BRICS at a time when relations with Washington were deteriorating.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the other BRICS, Russia is a global power without being a genuine regional power, and it seeks

to mitigate its isolation by forming coalitions with other actors. Just like the others, however, it sees this group as a means to multi-lateralize its power in all the areas where its position is vulnerable. On the other hand, it is careful not to play the joint card in areas where it has particular assets. For example, Moscow is anxious to ensure the G8 continues to function independently of the G20 even if that no longer makes much sense. Moscow seeks to protect its status as privileged partner of the United States, be it to the detriment of other BRICS. Russia therefore has no interest in increasing the number of permanent members in the Security Council. It could calculate that the entry of Brazil or India might help to counterbalance the West or even China, of which Moscow remains deeply distrustful. This type of calculation is always risky though, because it is difficult to anticipate the behavior of states. What is certain is that Russia sees its status as permanent member of the Security Council as one of its principal assets next to its nuclear power. Its economic and demographic positions are much weaker. As a rentier state, its vision of the international economic system is warped by the very nature of its economy, which is based on the value of hydrocarbons. Therefore, Russia does not have like the other BRICs a real strategy of growth and development. Therefore, Moscow only joins the BRICS on sovereignty-related issues, and even then, only if the BRICS agree on what they mean by sovereignty. Moscow received no support (or condemnation either) from the BRICS when it decided to invade Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in 2008, despite these two regions being located within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. It notably did not elicit a response from China, which is extremely stringent about respecting the territorial integrity of internationally recognized states.

### **China: The BRICS as Fulcrum of a Global Strategy**

The second actor among the BRICS with a particular status is China. It is naturally an emerging power in the full meaning of the term. But it is also far from being the most emergent of the emerging powers. It has the ambition of a great power that purely and simply aims to become the principal challenger to US power through pacific means. One of Beijing's main objectives is to accordingly form a privileged partnership with the United States. In this perspective, China seeks to reduce the number of actors likely to thwart, limit or relativize the centrality of its relationship with the United States. This objective does not preclude the development of more or less structured alliances with other actors. China's strategy towards the BRICS stems from this perspective: play the game of integrating into the capitalist system without assuming the political consequences. The fact that China's BRICS partners have different political systems from its own – most prominently because they

are democratic – constitutes an additional asset for China, precisely because it allows China to demonstrate to the West that stringent attachment to sovereignty is in no way linked to the nature of political systems. In other words, if China refuses the slightest interference in its internal affairs, especially for anything related to human rights, it is not because it is not democratic, but rather because it considers the protection of sovereignty to be crucial to a stable international order. BRICS membership thus allows Beijing to share its sovereignist approach. As is the case with Russia though, an alliance with other sovereignist states does not imply a willingness to share its assets of power with them. This explains why China is one of the states most hostile to what could be called a democratization of the international system that might go beyond a greater recognition of its own rights within this system.<sup>13</sup> An example is its opposition to increasing the number of permanent members of the Security Council. This is almost a strategic objective for China to the extent that the principal beneficiary of the democratization of the UN's system would be India, which also happens to be a BRICS member that enjoys US support for its claim to a seat. As a result, the BRICS are a curious coalition, wherein members seek to neutralize each other in the most strategic areas of power. In a recent interview, the head of Brazilian diplomacy recognized that China was most reticent to reforming the Security Council. He added, not without humor: 'China is not against reform *per se*, but it does not want to increase the number of countries with veto rights'.<sup>14</sup> In short, China does not have anything against Brazil, but neither does it have any reason to give Brazil a gift.

As a strategic power that is intent on rivaling the United States, China is naturally an economic power with a GNP that is projected to surpass that of the United States at the nominal level in 2025. By dint of the simple fact that it has become the second greatest economic power in the world, China has seen its economic relations with the other BRICS significantly increase. China is the primary trade partner of Brazil, India and South Africa. The interdependence among BRICS is thereby considerably deepening.<sup>15</sup> This development should be interpreted with caution, however. The closer economic ties among the BRICS have more to do with additional bilateral agreements than with any integration among these countries. For all the BRICS, the region remains the preferred level for economic integration processes. Moreover, China's rising economic power is a cause for concern among its partners, and especially for Brazil. The latter is worried about Chinese inroads, which it seeks to counter by strengthening economic integration within South America (Roussef, 2011).

### **Brazil: The BRICS as an Identity Support**

This brings us to Brazil, which is unquestionably one of the central BRICS actors. Under the leadership of Lula and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Celso



Amorim, Brazil played a significant role in the emergence of the BRICS. As mentioned earlier, it was a driving force in forming the Cancun front. More recently, with Turkey, it was central to a political maneuver to counter the Americans with regard to Iran by attempting to negotiate a trilateral agreement with Teheran on nuclear waste reprocessing. Brazil sees the BRICS as an intermediary political circle in between the West – and particularly the United States, with which it enjoys close relations – and Latin America, which forms its natural economic and political sphere of influence. The complementarity of Brasilia's objectives is expressed in the fact that Lula both centrally integrated Brazil into the BRICS and crucially contributed to the creation of UNASUR. However, this activism has reached its limits. In a recent declaration on foreign affairs, the head of Brazilian diplomacy explicitly referred to IBSA and did not mention the BRICS, even with reference to Syria.<sup>16</sup> In another statement, he emphasized that the nature of Brazilian power was different from that of China and Russia.<sup>17</sup> This omission is not fortuitous. Brazil now understands that China is pursuing a big power strategy. While it might share much common ground with Chinese objectives, it certainly cannot build a strategic alliance given China's economic expansionism and its refusal to support Brazil's accession to a permanent seat on the Security Council. More generally, beyond China, it is apparent that Brazil's failure in the Iranian case has been instrumental in readjusting Brazilian diplomacy since Dilma Rouseff took office. Rouseff would like to refocus on Brazil's internal problems and regional roots. Brasilia understands that it does not have an immediate political interest in overexposing itself in areas where Brazil's main interests are not at stake, but where its activism is likely to get it into trouble, especially in relation to the United States. In any case, in the Iranian matter, Brazil was not able to count on either Russia or China when the time came to vote on the third round of sanctions against Iran, as these two countries had already reached an agreement with Washington beforehand.<sup>18</sup> As a result, Brazil found itself isolated. It cannot be ruled out that the Russians welcomed this failure with some relief. Indeed, if the Turks and Brazilians had reached an agreement with Teheran, the Russians and Chinese would have found themselves in the awkward situation of having to explain their alignment with Western positions. Furthermore, the Russians do not want to see an increase in the number of powers outside of the region intervening and thus encroaching on their influence in the P5 + 1. It is also not impossible that the Obama administration made Brasilia pay the price for its independence by being tepid in its support for Brazil's possible accession to permanent membership in the Security Council. Meanwhile, the United States has explicitly supported India's candidacy. India is certainly not an easy partner for the United States, which refers to India as a 'sovereignty hawk'.<sup>19</sup> However, India offers resources that Brazil cannot when it comes to counterbalancing

China. Obama thus somewhat disappointed the Brazilians, who were probably expecting too much from him anyway.<sup>20</sup>

The BRICS must be taken seriously because their centrality in the global system is only going to continue to grow in the next years and decades. Yet their existence has both great and contradictory implications. First, they confirm that globalization, far from extinguishing national sovereignties, reinforces them as it transforms them. Second, they show that national sovereignty in the narrow sense of the term cannot be the source of a collective political project. The BRICS share a sovereigntist approach to avoid sharing sovereignty. Their place in the international system should be interpreted in light of this radical ambivalence.

### **India: China in Mind**

Along with Brazil and China, India is one of the BRICS' three heavyweights. The country is propelled by demography, economic growth and ambition. As is the case for the two other BRICS, a central priority is economic development, which India considers a precondition for its strategic projection. India is also heir to a long diplomatic tradition based on nonalignment. Of course, the notion of nonalignment may appear incongruous today since it was formulated at a time when India was seeking to maintain equidistance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In fact though, nonalignment was a means for India to assert its sovereignty in relation to the United States and China through strategic cooperation with the USSR, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1960 Sino-Soviet Split. China remains the greatest and most concerning partner-rival that India needs to contain, no longer through the strategic support of Russia, which is now too weak, but rather that of the United States. *A priori*, the attempt to form privileged relations with the United States to counter China may seem inconsistent with the BRICS' goal of checking Western hegemony. However, an ambitious power's strategic reality rests on several complementary and contradictory dimensions (Khilnani *et al*, 2012a). India needs the United States to enhance its economic development and to counter China, but it has no intention of tying itself to the United States to reach this objective.

The historical record of the United States bears out that powers that form formal alliances with it have tended to see an erosion of their strategic autonomy. Both India and the United States may be better served by being friends rather than allies (Khilnani *et al*, 2012a).

This has not stopped India from increasingly deepening economic relations with China or from worrying about the formation of a possible Sino-American axis to its strategic detriment. Thus non-alignment actually expresses a desire

to maximize India's options in its relations with the world. For the Indians, nonaligned means: dependent on nobody. At the same time, the Indians clearly see that their most important political relationships are those with Washington and Beijing. The BRICS' role is accordingly diminished.<sup>21</sup> At best it is one of several instruments for India to use in managing its relationship with China. There is little doubt that if China was not a part of this group India would not invest much in it.

India's political involvement in the BRICS can be seen as the by-product of a global strategy whose overriding concern is to contain China's rise without becoming part and parcel of the US strategy.<sup>21</sup>

### **The BRICS and the Bretton Woods Institutions**

For over a decade now, the BRICS as well as other emerging countries have demanded better representation in multilateral institutions, which are based on an antiquated power structure that benefits Western countries. This pressure increased significantly after the 2008–2009 crisis highlighted the central role of emerging countries as both creditors and sources of global growth. The demand first yielded the G20 and then resulted in the redefinition of quotas and voting rights in the International Monetary Fund. On 15 December 2010, the Board of Governors, the Fund's highest decision-making body, approved a package of far-reaching reforms of the Fund's quotas and governance. The reform package builds on the 2008 reforms, which became effective on 3 March 2011.<sup>22</sup>

This reform shifted more than 6 per cent of quota shares from over-represented to under-represented member countries, significantly realigning quota shares. China will become the third largest member country in the IMF, and there will be four countries (Brazil, China, India and Russia) among the 10 largest shareholders in the Fund.

Besides their demand for better representation of emerging countries in the IMF, they logically requested a change in the selection process for the heads of these institutions in order to end the implicit agreement whereby the IMF is placed under European control and the World Bank under US control. All of the BRICS summits have emphasized this crucial point (BRICS Information Center, 2012).

However, in the wake of the unexpected opening to succeed Dominique Strauss-Kahn as head of the IMF, solidarity among the BRICS revealed its weakness. At first, they all agreed to reject – and legitimately so – the European monopoly over leading the IMF.<sup>23</sup> However, some of them, and especially China and Brazil, were led to pursue narrow national calculations that created a real paradox, which was to withhold support for the only declared candidate

from an emerging country: the candidate from Mexico. For instance, the Chinese knew that a Chinese candidacy was premature and unacceptable to everyone. They therefore had the choice to either support another candidate selected by emerging countries or secure the number two IMF position as well as a rapid increase in China's voting rights.<sup>24</sup> They chose the second option, which has partially materialized since Mrs Lagarde took office. Brazil faced the same dilemma. It did not have a national candidate and could not have one at a time when it was seeking to lead the FAO. Brazil logically should have settled on the Mexican Carstens' candidacy, which virtually all the Latin American countries supported. However, one must account for the rivalry between Brazil and Mexico, and the Mexican candidate's identification with American neo-liberal orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup> It would therefore appear that China and Brazil approached Mrs Lagarde's candidacy with a national agenda that was partly at odds with the search for a common candidate. The lack of time was officially cited to justify the absence of a common candidacy. But that was not the whole picture.<sup>26</sup> In any case, the BRICS were not able to either put forward a common candidate or support the Mexican candidate who was supported by all of Latin America, with the exception of Brazil. This happened because, once again, these countries part ways as soon as power games place them in competition with one another. They have no problem collectively contesting Western dominance in world affairs. By the same token, they have no difficulty individually getting along with this same West to secure a particular national advantage, even at the cost of weakening the collective position of emerging countries. In the end, 'the differences among the BRICS largely exceed their areas of convergence'.<sup>27</sup>

This difficulty in presenting a united front was once again demonstrated in the spring of 2012 during the selection of Robert Zoellick's successor as head of the World Bank. The joint communiqué from the BRICS summit in Delhi in March 2012 stated: 'We welcome the candidatures from developing world for the position of the President of the World Bank. We reiterate that the Heads of IMF and World Bank be selected through an open and merit-based process. Furthermore, the new World Bank leadership must commit to transform the Bank into a multilateral institution that truly reflects the vision of all its members, including the governance structure that reflects current economic and political reality' (BRICS Information Center, 2012).

Significantly though, it stopped short of broaching the idea of a joint candidate, despite the fact that some, such as Brazil, aimed for this (BRICS Information Center, 2012). The decision by the World Bank's 25-member board confirmed that the BRICS were not unanimous. Brazil and South Africa backed Okonjo-Iweala, while China, India and Russia supported Kim (Table 1) (Wroughton, 2012).

The reasons why Russia, China and India supported the US candidate are not very clear, especially since these states did not officially state their

**Table 1:** The BRICS' support for candidates at the IMF and World Bank

	<i>IMF</i>			<i>World Bank</i>	
	<i>Christine Lagarde</i>	<i>Agustin Carstens</i>	<i>Others<sup>a</sup> (Trevor Manuel)</i>	<i>Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala</i>	<i>Jim Yong Kim</i>
Brazil	Δ	—	—	Δ	—
Russia	Δ	—	—	—	Δ
India	—	—	Δ	—	Δ
China	Δ	—	—	—	Δ
South Africa	—	—	Δ	Δ	—

<sup>a</sup>Initially, India and South Africa were in favor of a single candidate for the BRICS, but they failed to gain the collective BRICS' support.

positions. However, it is reasonable to believe that India and China, as heavy borrowers, pragmatically supported the candidate who was most likely to prevail given that he was not only backed by the United States, but also by Europe and Japan. They probably did not want to run the risk of supporting a candidate who would have been defeated. By contrast, it is extremely clear that despite the well-rehearsed discourse on better representation for emerging countries and greater transparency in selection processes, on an individual basis the BRICS acted opaquely. For example, they refrained from publicly expressing their positions on the candidate of their choice, even though they sent signals that left no doubt as to their vote. China officially deemed Mr Kim's candidacy 'encouraging' while regretting the continued US hold over the World Bank. In the end, encouragement translated into support (AFP, 2012). Thus, in selections that were less than a year apart, the BRICS were unable to put forward joint candidates to head the World Bank and the IMF. Their goal of creating their own development bank cannot mask this weakness.

### **The BRICS and the Arab Spring**

This stringency towards sovereignty has increased in a striking way since the beginning of the Arab Spring. At the United Nations, the BRICS formed a united front against the Western countries to prevent a vote on resolutions likely to breach the sovereignty of repressive states. Granted, they all voted for Resolution 1970, which placed sanctions on Libya. Several weeks later, however, they all abstained (with the exception of South Africa) during the decisive vote on resolution 1973, which paved the way for NATO's military intervention. At first the BRICS abstentions were considered a form of progress towards relativizing state sovereignty on the basis of the responsibility to

protect.<sup>18</sup> The West's political optimism proved to be quite premature though. In one way or another, all of the BRICS expressed the view that NATO had overstepped the rights created by resolution 1973 in Libya, and they feared a repeat of this pattern in Syria. At the same time, they did not offer a single alternative solution.<sup>29</sup> They just decided to staunchly oppose a vote on any resolution that might undermine Syrian sovereignty. To justify this attitude, on 15 June 2011, the head of Brazilian diplomacy explained to the Chamber of Deputies that the big difference between Libya and Syria was that 'Syria had demonstrated its willingness to engage in dialogue and pursue electoral reform'.<sup>30</sup> Syria was deemed more reasonable than Libya even while the Western approach to the latter was condemned. Yet when the West used the Libyan precedent to argue that it was futile to believe in the Syrian regime's ability to reform, the same Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs retorted: 'Libya is starting to become more amenable to a cease-fire, to the monitoring of a cease-fire, and to responding to the demonstrators' demands'.<sup>31</sup> Here again, this development – itself debatable – was not interpreted to the credit of NATO, which forced the Libyan regime to make concessions through its intervention. Even if the optimistic prognosis on the Damascus regime's willingness to reform has been completely contradicted by the facts, the BRICS continue to oppose any resolution that might even remotely resemble resolution 1973, which is not even the West's goal in this case. They are overplaying their card, so to speak, by jettisoning the idea of sanctions. In other words, the BRICS are refusing to vote for the equivalent of Libyan resolution 1970, for which they had unanimously voted. Yet they have not put forward a convincing explanation to justify this refusal, besides the fear of getting caught up in a cycle *à la* Libya that they seem to retrospectively regret not blocking. They merely say no to Western states without being capable of proposing a single alternative solution. This does not mean that their attitude is of no consequence to the Security Council's balance of power. The Security Council's presidential declaration of 3 August 2011 completely satisfied Brazil, which had proposed such an approach since June.<sup>32</sup> But, the worsening situation in Syria and the intransigence of Damascus' regime have led Brazil, India and South Africa to shift - albeit reluctantly – their position. They tried to stay midway between the West and the two implacable countries, which are Russia and China.<sup>33</sup> They abstained on the UNSC resolution 2012 which was vetoed by Russia and China and voted for the UNGA assembly which was non-binding (Table 2).

It is nonetheless interesting to note that when faced with a tense situation such as Syria, some of the BRICS sought to take the lead. In November 2011, several weeks after the Russo-Chinese veto on Syria, Brazil proposed to supplement the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) with that of Responsibility while Protecting (RWP) in order to prevent the use of R2P to

**Table 2: The BRICS and the Arab Spring**

	<i>UNSC Resolution 1973<sup>a</sup> 17 March 2011</i>	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution on Syria<sup>b</sup> 4 October 2011</i>	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution on Syria<sup>c</sup> 4 February 2012</i>	<i>UN General Assembly Resolution 253<sup>d</sup> 16 February 2012</i>
Brazil	Abstention	Abstention	— <sup>e</sup>	Yes
Russia	Abstention	Veto	Veto	No
India	Abstention	Abstention	Yes	Yes
China	Abstention	Veto	Veto	No
South Africa	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Yes

The details of the resolutions listed and numbered in the table are:

<sup>a</sup>UNSC Res. 1973 ‘authorizes Member States (...) to take all necessary measures (...) to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya’.

<sup>b</sup>The UNSC draft resolution condemns ‘the continued grave and systematic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities’ and calls on all states ‘to exercise vigilance and restraint’ in supplying weapons to Syria. Article 41 authorizes the council to impose non-military measures such as economic and diplomatic sanctions on the Syrian regime.

<sup>c</sup>*The draft resolution* ‘condemns the continued widespread and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities, such as the use of force against civilians, arbitrary executions, killing and persecution of protestors and members of the media, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, interference with access to medical treatment, torture, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, including against children’.

<sup>d</sup>The draft resolution ‘strongly condemns the continued widespread and systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities, such as the use of force against civilians, arbitrary executions, the killing and persecution of protestors, human rights defenders and journalists, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, interference with access to medical treatment, torture, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, including against children’. To be noted that General Assembly resolutions are non-binding.

<sup>e</sup>As of 1 January 2012, Brazil was replaced by Guatemala in the UNSC.

legitimate regime change, as was the case in Libya: ‘There is a growing perception that the concept of the responsibility to protect might be misused for purposes other than protecting civilians, such as regime change. This perception may make it even more difficult to attain the protection objectives pursued by the international community’ (General Assembly Security Council, 2011). Hence the call to tighten the conditions for using force when implementing R2P. These included a greater emphasis on prevention, the exhaustion of peaceful means, the prior consent of the Security Council for the use of force, and the judicious, proportionate and limited use of such force (General Assembly Security Council, 2011). While it is clear that Brazil is seeking to provide a better framework for the use of R2P, it is difficult to see how such proposals might be operationalized because they have too much scope for interpretation. For example, in the eyes of NATO the use of force in Libya in

no way overstepped resolution 1973 to the extent that the protection of the civilian population was inseparable from the destruction of the military potential of the Libyan regime, and ultimately its overthrow. Additional norms will do little to help resolve eminently political issues. The only question that this Brazilian proposal really raises is whether the Security Council should grant prior and explicit consent to the use of force, or whether invoking R2P suffices to make the use of force possible. In the first case, the Brazilian proposal would inevitably lead to more cumbersome UN procedures.

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## Notes

- 1 This point is cogently noticed by John Ikenberry in the conclusion of his last book (Ikenberry, 2011).
- 2 They can nonetheless assert with some justification that the United States, for example, remains fundamentally sovereignist despite its liberal orientation, as evidenced by its action in multi-lateral institutions and negotiations. For example, the United States is largely responsible for the current deadlock in WTO negotiations, or for the Security Council's total lack of condemnation of Israel on the settlement issue.
- 3 For more details on this issue, see the revelations made by Wikileaks (2011).
- 4 Interview, *Itamaraty* May 2011. Brasilia.
- 5 Clinton and Amorim's joint press conference in Brasilia (2010).
- 6 'All three of these countries, besides being developing, are plural, multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, and share elements of a common economic and political history', according to Indian ambassador Singh (Carpenter, 2009).
- 7 'Countries like Brazil, China, India, South Africa and a few others are the 'new kids on the block' among global players that shape international relations. They legitimately aspire to greater participation in international institutions, which still suffer from a 'democratic deficit.' Global decisions can no longer be made without listening to their voices' (Amorim, 2010).
- 8 Celso Amorim underscores the role of the Cancun conference in the political process of building the BRICS in (2010).
- 9 For more details on this case, see Laïdi (2003).
- 10 'The United States' main concessions in this round relate to agriculture. This is of interest to Brazil. However, China and India will only consider it politically optimal to further cut their tariffs if their exporters are offered tariffs conducive to their supporting an agreement' Baldwin, (2011).
- 11 Jim O'Neill (2011), who coined the term BRIC, told the BBC it was a mystery as to why South Africa had been invited to participate in their meeting: 'South Africa is small compared to these



countries. South Africa is about half a percent of global GDP. And there are other economies which have much more justification if they were to really look at similar potential to the Brics. Turkey, Indonesia, Mexico, Korea, even Saudi Arabia, Poland. I don't really understand why the Chinese and the others agreed to it'.

While this observation is economically pertinent, it is politically naïve in the sense that the thought process of the BRICS is fundamentally political. South Africa's accession allows the BRICS to include Africa and thus strengthen their international legitimacy.

- 12 'There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centres of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity' Putin (2007).
- 13 Celso Amorim deliberately overlooks this point when he says: 'The arrival of the BRICS is revolutionizing the global balance of power by making it more multipolar and more democratic' Amorim, (2011). Cf. my answer to him: Laïdi (2011).
- 14 *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, 17 July 2011.
- 15 In 2001, Chinese exports to India, Russia and Brazil did not exceed 3 billion dollars each. In 2009, Chinese exports to these three countries respectively reached 30, 17 and 14 billion dollars. In less than 10 years, Chinese exports to India have thus increased 10-fold. *Source*: World Bank.
- 16 Interview in *l'Estado de Sao Paulo*, 17 July 2011.
- 17 The New chief of Brazilian diplomacy, Antonio Patriota (2011), provides insights into the new directions of Brazilian diplomacy under the new presidency, in a subtle speech.
- 18 With regard to the Teheran Agreement of 17 May 2010, the former chief of Brazilian diplomacy writes that: 'The insistence on sanctions against Iran – effectively ignoring the Declaration of Tehran, and without even giving Iran time to respond to the comments of the "Vienna Group" (the US, France and Russia) – confirmed the opinions of many analysts who claimed that the traditional centers of power will not share gladly their privileged status'. This interpretation is not false in itself. However, the chief of Brazilian diplomacy is careful not to explain why China and Russia ended up voting for sanctions against Iran. See Amorim (2010).
- 19 Interview with Strobe Talbott (2011).
- 20 Interviews in *Itamaraty*, May 2011, Brasilia.
- 21 Quite significantly, the *Non alignment 2.0* report makes little mention of the BRICS, and when it does the BRICS are considered a strategic option among others: 'India has also benefited from its engagement with new institutions and groupings like IBSA, BRICS. These ought to be made more robust, while simultaneously newer avenues of strategic engagement should be added: such as the Indian Ocean region (going beyond the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, GCC, "dialogue of civilisations", among others. This is part of a strategy of broadening our options and arenas in which we can exercise influence for different purposes' (Khilnani *et al*, 2012b).
- 22 *International Monetary Fund*, Fact Sheet: IMF Quotas. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/pdf/quotas.pdf>.
- 23 'This requires abandoning the obsolete unwritten convention that requires that the head of the IMF be necessarily from Europe. We are concerned with public statements made recently by high-level European officials to the effect that the position of Managing Director should continue to be occupied by a European'. In: Statement by the IMF Executive Directors Representing Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa on the Selection Process for Appointing an IMF Managing Director (2011) Press Release No. 11/195, 24 May. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2011/pr11195.htm>.
- 24 For more on Beijing's support for Lagarde's candidacy (2011).
- 25 Brazilians are among the most hostile to the Fed's monetary policy, which is conducive to speculative capital flows to them. However, the situation was more complex with regard to the DSK succession case. The Brazilian representative to the IMF and the Brazilian Central Bank

- Governor seemed to favor Brazilian support for the Mexican candidacy. The Minister of Finance apparently made the decision to support Mrs Lagarde, since the president did not get involved in the matter at all. According to *Valor Economico*, 30 June 2011.
- 26 According to the Indian Minister of Finance: 'We are working together with the BRICS countries. It is difficult to say at right this moment because there is a divergence of views in respect of different candidates'. Cited in Indian Ministry of Finance (2011) Also see: *The Economist* (2011).
- 27 For a sober assessment of the performances of the BRICS made by these countries' representatives, see BRICS.
- 28 The head of Brazilian diplomacy recently affirmed that his country's abstention on resolution 1973 was akin to a 'caution' signal. The big question is what this signal meant: caution to the Libyan regime, or caution to the West, which might be tempted to move too swiftly and too strongly. He probably meant a combination of the two. See his interview in *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, 17 July 2011.
- 29 'Brazil will not accept a document that is identical to the one that was passed against Libya and that led to airstrikes', Declaration from the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, cited in: *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 10 June 2011.
- 30 *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 16 June 2011.
- 31 Cited in *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, 17 July 2010.
- 32 *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, 21 June 2011.
- 33 See the interview with the Brazilian Foreign Minister, *O Globo*, 7 August 2011.

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