CAN BRICS FIND THEIR VOICE? BRICS’ ROLE IN PEACE AND SECURITY

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The Logic for an Enhanced Role for BRICS in Global Peace and Security

BRICS started in the public perception as an economic group. Many analysts, therefore, felt BRICS would remain an economic bloc given the enormous disparities among these countries. Nobody thought in terms of a common political agenda.

The relative decline in the economic and political power of the West has, however, highlighted this dimension and has hastened this process of the BRICS finding their political voice in global affairs. Commensurate with their increased economic heft in the world, BRICS is adding more political issues to its agenda and beginning to weigh in on issues of international geo-political importance. BRICS is emerging as an alternative voice to Western dominated discourse on global/regional issues. The old world order does not appear to have legitimacy nor do the “old powers” have the capacity to sustain that order. Though some strides have been made in reforming economic structures/international financial architecture of the world, genuine all round progress that reflects the change political realities cannot be made without restructuring political structures in the world. However, the old powers are reluctant to give up or accept a reduction in their powers.

BRICS is for a fair, democratic, polycentric world order. “Coming, as we do, from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, the transcontinental dimension of our interaction adds to its value and significance.”(Delhi Declaration)
Since the BRICS countries are home to around half of the world’s population, it is only logical that they have a say in regional and global issues. Individually also, each of the BRICS is a regional power in its own right—Brazil in South America, Russia in Eurasia, India in South Asia, China in South-East and East Asia, South Africa in Southern Africa.

In addition, Russia, India and China together constitute about half of the Asia’s territory. The three are also nuclear powers and have some of the strongest militaries in the world. Russia and China are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). BRICS countries individually are members of important groups like the G4 (working for reform of the UN), BASIC (climate change), ASEAN, IBSA, etc. With all of them being members of the WTO and other International Financial Institutions as well as new donors/aid givers, their economic power is felt across regions.

As their overseas interests broaden and they get more integrated into the global economy, peace and security in other region of the world have begun to affect the BRICS more and more. For instance, China and India are major importers of oil from the Middle East. Any instability there affects their economies.

Naturally, they have a major stake in ensuring that the region is not destabilised at a time when the West, particularly the US, is moving away from the region. US economic interests in the region are reducing due to the Shale revolution and political engagement is perceived to be declining because of the announced policy of rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific – the so-called “pivot”. Similar changes are occurring in other regions as well.

These shifts are inevitably going to lead to BRICS playing a more important role in shaping the emerging peace and security agenda in the world.
BRICS themselves are beginning to recognise their economic, political, and military weight. Reflecting this, they have started issuing statements on global and regional issues in their summit declarations. The Delhi declaration was the first to go in depth about regional issues, moving away from the abstract ideas expressed earlier. The Delhi Declaration covered a range of issues from the Middle East to Afghanistan and terrorism. This was true of the E-Thekwini Declaration as well which took up issues like Syria, Palestine, Middle East Peace Process, Iran, Afghanistan, terrorism and the situation in Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Initially the BRICS had different stances on various issues, but increasingly their positions are converging rather than diverging. For instance, in 2011 Brazil supported Resolution 1970 on Libya, which paved the way for Western involvement in the Libyan crisis, while Russia and China abstained. Except for South Africa, which supported it, all the BRICS countries abstained on Resolution 1973 on the same issue. The same is the case with the Syrian crisis. While Russia and China vetoed a resolution to overthrow the Assad regime, India and South Africa abstained.

But by the 2013 summit in South Africa, their positions became more congruent as is evident from the E-Thekwini Declaration. The declaration opposed further militarisation of Syria and said that “a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition can be achieved only through broad national dialogue that meets the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect for Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty”.

**United Nations: United We Stand**

If there is one issue that unites the BRICS, it is that they all believe in the legitimacy of the UN and the UNSC’s primacy in maintaining peace and security. Given the importance they attach to the UN in dealing with international security affairs, BRICS countries try to play a greater role in the framework of UN either
through contributing more available resources or by promoting the reform of UN Security Council.¹

While Russia and China are permanent members of the Security Council, India, South Africa and Brazil have frequently been elected to the non-permanent seats on the Council.² For instance, in 2011, all the BRICS countries were members of the UNSC. But the BRICS needs to work more actively to ensure that there is a reform of the UNSC and that the BRICS countries which are not permanent members of the UNSC (India, Brazil and South Africa) become permanent members of the Council.

India, China and Brazil have been three of the biggest contributors to the UN Peacekeeping Forces. The BRICS also contribute money for peacekeeping forces at a time when donations from the West are decreasing and when lack of funding is becoming a major constraint for collective action under UN auspices.³ Thus, their contributions are becoming more and more important.

BRICS countries all voted supporting UN General Assembly in 2005 on Responsibility to Protect recognising the right of the international community to intervene in a country which is in crisis. However, as is clear from the intervention in Libya, the West has used the principle to intervene unilaterally in the domestic affairs of other countries. This is something which the BRICS oppose. They support the principle, but argue that any action under this principle should be with a clear UNSC mandate.

India would like BRICS to adhere to UN principles on intervention and believes that BRICS needs to arrive at a common position on sovereignty and interventions.

Global Issues-The Middle East

BRICS have similar positions on almost all major issues of global concern today like Iran, Syria and the situation in the larger Middle East.

Russia and China are part of the P5+1 group which is engaged in talks with Iran. BRICS countries support a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue and a permanent deal which also upholds Iran’s deal, which upholds Iran’s right to pursue peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Russia had a key role in trying to bring about a resolution to the Syrian crisis and helping in dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons. India, Russia, and China were part of the Geneva II talks. BRICS support a political solution to the crisis, which is Syrian led and oppose external interference. BRICS’ increased legitimacy and credibility is evident from the fact that the Syrian President wrote to the BRICS asking them to intervene to help bring about a resolution to the crisis.

The BRICS have repeatedly reiterated their support for peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Middle East peace process.

Afghanistan, Africa

On Afghanistan as well, they have similar views. The E-Thekwini Declaration said BRICS supports “Afghanistan’s emergence as a peaceful, stable and democratic state, free of terrorism and extremism, and underscore the need for more effective regional and international cooperation for the stabilisation of Afghanistan, including by combating terrorism”.

BRICS Development Bank

Most scholars agree that poverty is one of the root causes of extremism and instability in the world. To address this, the BRICS decided to establish a BRICS
Development Bank. The Bank aims to help poor countries alleviate poverty by extending loans and grants. This bank is not intended to supplant, but to supplement current financial institutions like the IMF, World Bank and ADB. But, having a better understanding and sense of poverty, it is unlikely that the BRICS Bank would have impose the doctrinaire preconditions for disbursement of loans that are insisted upon by the Western dominated institutions.

If the BRICS bank can contribute towards uplifting people out of poverty, it would contribute immensely to peace and security in the world. However, for this they will have to work harder to arrive at a common view on some of the issues still dividing them.

Coming to the three specific issues we have been asked to address:

**Terrorism**

The BRICS undoubtedly have a common interest in fighting international terrorism in all forms. They have supported UNSC resolutions against terrorism. One way to cooperate on this would be to try and have meetings of intelligence officials and police officials or at least the heads of intelligence outfits. They could exchange information and help assist each other in capacity building. Counter-terrorism/ counter-insurgency units could also hold exercises together and learn from the best practices of each other. They could set up a unit on cross-border terrorism or a counter-terrorism force.

A lower hanging fruit will probably be the exchanging lists of banned terrorist organisations and ensuring that these groups do not operate in their territories, as well as influencing their partners outside BRICS to follow this. Extradition procedures could also be simplified.

A measure similar to the EU solidarity clause could be adopted by BRICS. This would oblige members to help each other, if requested, in the case of a terrorist
attack. The BRICS could also work on the creation of common security standards for air, road, rail, and maritime traffic, airport security, port security, security for container ports, general shipments, and shipments of energy and hazardous materials.

**Cyber security**

BRICS needs to come to a common understanding on cyber security. This is important given the growing online populations as well as the rise of digital commerce in these countries. Given their large online populations India, Brazil and China are considered to be “swing states” in the discourse on cyberspace and cyber security. Moreover, most of the discourse on management of cyber-space currently emanates from the West.

In fact, the BRICS Foreign Ministers’ meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA in 2013 had expressed concern about “unauthorized interception of communications and data from citizens, businesses and members of governments, compromising national sovereignty and individual rights”.

They reiterated the need to participate and contribute “in a peaceful, secure, and open cyberspace” and emphasized the importance of “security in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) through universally accepted norms, standards and practices”.

BRICS could exchange best practices in fighting cyber crime and have regular institutionalised meetings of their emergency response teams. They could establish a working group on cyber security and inform each other of cyber crimes and share experiences about fighting cyber crime.

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It is also critical that the BRICS countries come to a common understanding on cyberspace governance and cyber security. They need to come to a middle path on the crucial issue of freedom of expression versus legitimate security interests of states. It is heartening that the NSAs have already discussed cooperation in this arena in their meetings.

**BRICS Armed Forces as a Tool for International Cooperation**

This is the third issue, which was flagged in the agenda sent to us. Frankly, I think this is a non-starter. While India undoubtedly has the ability to deploy forces aboard and is the largest contributor to the UN Peace Keeping Forces, it is difficult at this stage to envisage India being willing to contribute to any operation which is not under the UN flag. We may have the capacity but not the will/intent for this.

**Conclusion**

As BRICS broadens its internal understanding of issues, it will opine on a broader range of issues. BRICS has already made attempts to coordinate their positions on regional and global affairs issues through meetings of their Foreign Ministers on the margins of the UN general Assembly. Their National Security Advisors have also met to discuss these issues. If the five countries are able to coordinate their positions on critical issues, they will have much more chance of influencing world politics and of directing the discourse on peace and security.

The fact that the BRICS are making their opinions heard on these issues show that they see their future as being closely linked to being integrated to the rest of the world and globalisation. Therefore, BRICS interest and influence in world peace and security is only going to increase rather than decrease in the years ahead.

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