BRICS AND MULTILATERALISM WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

BRICS can be seen as a new multilateral player on the global stage. BRICS member states view their differences as a demonstration of the diversity of the world’s civilizations, and celebrate their commonalities. For instance, BRICS countries share a long-standing history of geo-political and economic relations of solidarity, support, and mutual cooperation, notably embedded in the legacy of international fora such as the Bandung Conference (1955). The latter conference was an important step toward the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), amongst others, and there is a recognition that the diversity of the member states opens up the possibility for deeper cooperation for mutual benefit. This paper considers BRICS within this context of multilateralism. The first section takes a brief look at what multilateralism means in international relations. Thereafter there is a focus on the particular nature of multilateralism within and among BRICS. Lastly, some recommendations are made to inform the development of the BRICS grouping as a champion of a new global order based on mutual cooperation and respect for the rule of law.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing role of BRICS can also be evidenced by the rapid recovery of these economies from the global financial crisis. This has demonstrated that optimal global economic policy making cannot be undertaken without including the BRICS economies at the highest level. In addition, beyond economics, the geopolitical role of BRICS is becoming increasingly relevant on the world stage. BRICS is here to stay, and now is the time to start imagining a new global order that does not repeat the mistakes of the past (Kornegay and Bohler-Muller, 2013: XXVIII).

The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) has been described – and indeed describes itself - as a new multilateral player on the global stage. Despite the differences among and between its members in terms of history, culture, political systems, economic structures, resource endowment, and levels of development, BRICS member states view these differences as a demonstration of the diversity of the world’s civilizations. There are also many areas of
commonality. For instance, BRICS countries share a long-standing history of geopolitical and economic relations of solidarity, support, and mutual cooperation, notably embedded in the legacy of international fora such as the United Nations (UN) as well as the Bandung Conference of 1955, which was the first large-scale Afro-Asian conference to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism by any nation. This conference was an important step toward the crystallisation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), amongst others. There is therefore a recognition that the diversity of the member states opens up the possibility for deeper cooperation for mutual benefit, drawing on the comparative advantage of each country to collectively complement and build on one another’s strengths.

This paper considers BRICS within this context of multilateralism. The first section takes a brief look at what multilateralism means in international relations. Thereafter there is a focus on the particular nature of multilateralism within and among BRICS, and lastly some recommendations are made to inform the development of the BRICS grouping as a champion of a new global order based on mutual cooperation and respect for the rule of law.

Faced with a revisionist agenda from groupings such as BRICS, the question may very well be whether established powers are up to the challenge of reforms to international and global governance structures, in a manner that could be termed “institutionalized power transitions”. From a multilateral point of view, institutionalised power transitions present a political alternative which allows for cooperative reform (Baracuhy, 2012:9). Amongst the BRICS member states are some of the world’s fastest growing economies wielding great influence as well as global power. Some of this influence includes being rule-setters at the World Trade Organization and veto wielding powers in the form of China and Russia in the United Nations Security Council. But this is not enough, because for institutionalised power transitions to take place established powers must be ready to play the “reform game” (Baracuhy, 2012:10).

2. MULTILATERALISM IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

In its first official policy statement on international relations in December 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) as a ruling party placed an emphasis on the importance of multilateralism, which is a position the South African government has not deviated from:
The pace and scope of global change has improved the prospects for multilateralism. Increasing economic interdependency, the fragility of the planet’s eco-system and the rapid increases in technology have underlined the necessity to approach many international questions from a common perspective: judicious multilateral diplomacy will enhance South Africa’s international standing (see http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=230).

In order to better understand the BRICS’ commitment to multilateralism it is informative to consider the trajectory, since the Second World War, of multilateral diplomacy (referred to by some as ‘soft power’), which has created an environment conducive to establishing a more egalitarian world order. For example, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a multilateral effort that began in Belgrade in 1961 to strengthen the “struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics” (Castro, 1979). Although less active than during the Cold War, the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement represent nearly two-thirds of the UN’s membership and constitute 55% of the world population. Membership is particularly concentrated in countries considered to be developing or part of what used to be known as the “Third World” (Grant, 1995:567-587). The NAM espouses policies and practices of cooperation, especially those that are multilateral and provide mutual benefit to all those involved. Although the nature of BRICS is trade focussed and not necessarily premised on taking the ‘high moral ground’, the principle of multilateralism applies nevertheless and previous efforts to cooperate have surely contributed to closer relations amongst the BRICS nations.

According to Ruggie (1993:3-36) multilateralism is an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct. The generalised principles of conduct are: non-discrimination; indivisibility; and diffuse reciprocity. Put simply,

- “non-discrimination” implies that all parties are treated similarly;
- “indivisibility” considers an attack on one to be an attack on all; and
- “diffuse reciprocity” means that states do not rely on short term quid pro quo exchanges, but on longer term assurances of balance in their relations.

Thus, multilateralism can be construed as the most egalitarian form of international cooperation and decision-making and multilateral institutions have the potential to provide developing countries with an equal voice in
international relations. Multilateralism in general and multilateral institutions in particular thus provide a more democratic means of determining which global issues should be addressed and how states should address them. It should be noted that BRICS is not a multilateral institution per se, but it is clear that BRICS is committed to multilateralism as opposed to unipolar dominance in international relations. BRICS countries are members of a number of political and financial multilateral institutions of global governance, some of which require reforms to become more democratic and representative of the interests of developing nations.

As Al-Rodhan et al. (2009:24) further explain:

> Effective multilateralism can be defined as “a system that is able to ensure that every human being, at the global level, has access to the core public goods that the State provides at the national level— or is rightly expected to provide – to its citizens” including “physical security and stability [...]; an enforceable legal order; an open and inclusive economic order that provides for the wealth of everyone [...]; well-being in all of its aspects – access to health, to education, to a clean environment, and to similar goods”. Such a system would strengthen international order, but its efficiency largely depends on how coherent the strategies of multilateral institutions are.

At global level, multilateralism has an important role to play in promoting a more stable, peaceful, just and environmentally sustainable world order. Multilateralism has also been defined by Kahler (1992:681) as “international governance of the ‘many,’” with its central principle being “opposition [to] bilateral discriminatory arrangements that were believed to enhance the leverage of the powerful over the weak and to increase international conflict”. Multilateralism is thus based on trying to reach a sense of global uniformity and understanding in relation to parts of the world which do not wield the same influence as others.

Against this background, the next section looks more closely at BRICS’ focus on multilateralism and polycentricism, which some submit has led to a shift in power from North to South and from West to East.

3. **BRICS’ FOCUS ON MULTILATERALISM AND THE CREATION OF A POLYCENTRIC WORLD ORDER**
To know what sort of global order will emerge on the other side of the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity depends largely on the existing mechanisms set in place to carry about the process of change (Baracuhy, 2012:6).

As mentioned in all the Summit Declarations of BRIC(S) since its inception in Yekaterinburg in 2009, BRICS member states aim to use multilateral diplomacy to leverage and exert pressure for significant reforms and balanced representation within international organizations responsible for political and economic governance, including: the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); the International Monetary Fund (IMF); the World Bank (WB); and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The main aim of the BRICS is thus to promote a polycentric world order which benefits previously marginalized developing countries, especially in the global South. Alongside pressing for reforms of the existing global architecture, BRICS also aims to establish a new, complementary development finance institution, the BRICS Development Bank, to mobilise financial resources for productive investment; to promote strong, effective and efficient governance to enable BRICS countries to maintain their rates of growth and development; and to promote the effective and full participation of all stakeholders in society to address issues of political governance and socio-economic disparities.

The trend towards polycentricity and commitment to multilateralism has seen BRICS emerge (“rise”) as a powerful player on the global stage. The international ‘playing field’ is being levelled by groupings such as BRICS:

Arguments that emphasize the differences among the BRICS and the difficulties of its members to come up with common positions are lagging behind the evolution of diplomacy and miss two important points: (i) the BRICS are already a political reality; and (ii) the BRICS display a solid political unity in favour of reforms in the rules and structures of the existing international order (Baracuhy, 2012:10).

Within this context, BRICS member states are committed to assuming an increasingly significant role in international relations concomitant with their growing global and regional economic and political significance. In order to facilitate real change there is a need for BRICS to strengthen its agenda around common interests. Some recommendations follow, although it is certainly not an exhaustive list:
3.1 Pursuing effective reform in the governance and operation of international organisations through multilateral diplomacy. This includes seeking the reform and greater effectiveness of the UNSC, IMF, WB and WTO Doha Round. This is an example of institutional reform or “institutionalised power transitions” as explained above. In this regard, there is some dissonance within BRICS on a number of issues that has delayed or prevented effective reform of the global political and economic architecture. BRICS member states need to expand their consensus on major international reforms, and to enhance solidarity and cooperation further to increase their effectiveness. This includes

- Opposing trade protectionism, protecting multilateral trade, and advancing the Doha Round of trade talks.
- Working together to obtain a bigger say for developing countries in global economic governance, including the IMF and the WB.
- Particularly strengthening cooperation to advance the quota reforms of the IMF.
- Speeding up efforts to set up a BRICS development bank.
- Pressurising the world’s major economies, including G20 members, to step up coordination to promote sustainable and balanced global economic growth.

3.2 Swift and ambitious collective decision making within multilateral fora and international organizations. It is necessary for BRICS to find common ground and to work to the mutual benefit of all member states. A challenge here is that each BRICS country has its own national and regional interests to protect. South Africa, for instance, has placed emphasis on the centrality of its “African agenda” and prioritises regional integration. This focus on regionalism within the BRICS agenda is not necessarily endorsed by all the BRICS member states as the situation in regions is different for each country, with geopolitical tensions existing between China and India for instance. Brazil also sees its regional role as separate from its BRICS agenda.

3.3 Coordination on positions for multilateral negotiations and mobilizing international support to achieve common objectives for the mutual benefit of member states and developing nations. In a sense, BRICS aims to be the ‘voice’ for other developing countries and emerging markets so as to re-balance global power relations to create a more just and egalitarian world order. In this sense BRICS must prove itself to be an open and transparent leader in the democratic reform of international institutions so as to allow for better representation and the promotion of the interests of developing nations and the ‘Global South’. In doing so, it is important for BRICS not to be seen as a grouping that opposes the
West as this could lead to a fragmented global order rather than furthering the multilateral agenda. In addition, BRICS should not alienate other developing countries and emerging markets in a quest to exert power.

3.4 Active interaction and exchange of ideas among BRICS member states in the UN and its specialised agencies. As stated in paragraph 20 of the eThekwini Declaration:

We reiterate our strong commitment to the United Nations (UN) as the foremost multilateral forum entrusted with bringing about hope, peace, order and sustainable development to the world. The UN enjoys universal membership and is at the centre of global governance and multilateralism. In this regard, we reaffirm the need for a comprehensive reform of the UN, including its Security Council, with a view to making it more representative, effective and efficient, so that it can be more responsive to global challenges. In this regard, China and Russia reiterate the importance they attach to the status of Brazil, India and South Africa in international affairs and support their aspiration to play a greater role in the UN.

BRICS has from the outset acknowledged its commitment to the UN as the “foremost multilateral forum”. This reflects a clear commitment to work within existing systems to influence reforms.

3.5 Pursuing a collective position on UNSC governance reforms so as to prioritise fairer treatment in international relations for BRICS member states and other developing nations, as stated above, including seeking balanced representation in the UNSC, IMF, WB and WTO Doha Round. With regard to the reform of the UNSC, there appears to be no consensus as to the nature that the reforms should take, and this needs to be resolved so as to prevent tensions among members. Currently China and Russia are permanent members of the UNSC with veto powers, whereas Brazil, India and South Africa are aspiring members of an expanded and more regionally representative permanent council. Although BRICS leaders have expressed support for these aspirations in paragraph 20 of the eThekwini Declaration, China and Russia have to date not expressly supported the inclusion of the other three countries and have rather used the rhetoric of increased ‘effectiveness’ of the UNSC. Furthermore, South Africa is in the difficult position of not alienating the African Union (AU), which is of the view that more than one African country should be represented on the permanent council.

3.6 Pursuing a more proactive role in international conflict management through institutionalised coordination and collaboration, especially in promoting
respect for and compliance with the rule of international law and treaties
governing international political and economic relations. Ostensibly, BRICS
maintains a ‘non-interventionist’ stance that respects state sovereignty, although
there are some differences in this respect that have been evident in voting for or
against UNSC resolutions in relation to Libya and Syria for instance. The present
situation in the Ukraine will also potentially test the extent of cooperation
amongst the BRICS with respect to international conflict resolution.

3.7 Promoting, through multilateral diplomacy, the BRICS identity and using
the collective leverage of BRICS in international fora for the common interests of
member states and other developing nations. The sharing of information,
knowledge and data amongst the BRICS countries would be useful in this regard.
It is also important to ensure that BRICS is seen as revisionist/ visionary and not
reactionary. Any indication that BRICS is ‘against’ the West will result in
unnecessary defensiveness on the part of the US and EU in particular, which
would result in opposition to proposed reforms of international institutions.
BRICS needs to use ‘soft power’ within international fora to push for change
without alienating the ‘traditional powers’.

At the top of the agenda, in order to ensure effective international
economic and financial governance, the BRICS member states aim to play a
leading role in formulating positions on international monetary and
financial system reforms on behalf of member states, other emerging
markets and developing countries. One of the priorities in this regard is to
ensure strengthened cooperation within the framework of international
organisations to collectively promote mutual interests in the area of
international trade. With regard to reform of global financial institutions,
the aim is to attain equity and fairness, especially in the IMF and WB, which
is an overriding imperative for the five BRICS countries. There is clear
agreement that there is a need for greater voting quota distribution for
emerging powers and developing countries in the Bretton Woods
institutions. Reforming the IMF quota system has been long overdue, but is
resisted by the US. However, BRICS missed a chance to show that they have
a joint strategy to achieve the much needed reforms when they failed to
agree on a non-European candidate to occupy the post of managing
Director of the IMF when Strauss-Kahn resigned.

It is clear that the BRICS want to see the international balance of power change,
and will as ‘new’ powers therefore seek to alter the status quo in ways that
favour their interests and those of the developing world in general. But there are
no plans, as some would claim, to overthrow the system. The aim is to reform the
system as diplomacy, geopolitics and multilateralism become inextricably linked.
What this means in real terms remains to be seen.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the existence of obvious differences between and among BRICS member states, BRICS sees these differences as an opportunity to share experiences amongst one another and to find solutions to common problems and challenges. Within the context of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, BRICS member states recognise that stable, accountable and efficient governance at all levels is crucial for member states individually and collectively to maintain their rates of growth, participation, and sustainable development. It is generally acknowledged that good national, political and economic governance facilitates the creation of a solid foundation for multilateral cooperation and collective action in the international arena. To this end, BRICS member states would benefit from sharing experiences through the reliable collection of data and information on social and economic development and best practices.

It remains to be seen whether BRICS will live up to its potential as a forerunner of a new ‘Global Order’ where power is more evenly distributed and where interdependence becomes a mark of strength in international relations. South African foreign policy emphasises the importance of relationship-building in the spirit of Ubuntu / Botho, an African philosophy that recognises the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of community. The South African White Paper entitled *Building a Better World: the Diplomacy of Ubuntu* (2011) posits that South African international relations are informed by the history of colonialism and the liberation struggle, as well as by the hard-won values of dignity, equality and freedom. As a result, its foreign policy is informed by a commitment to multilateralism, making BRICS a good option for furthering this agenda.

Clearly, BRICS could be the stimulus for an interconnected and equitable world order. What is needed is a coherent strategy and the leveraging of commonalities and strengths.

REFERENCES


