

Are “Birds of a Feather Flocking Together” in the Midst of Global Gridlock?—Conceptualizing BRICS (+) as “*The New Kid on the Block*”

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Abstract

This research paper explores the potential that BRICS or BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have in providing an alternative angle of analysis to the Western centrism that dominates the world order. BRICS is presented as a heterogeneous group of countries united by a common cause—the struggle for recognition in the face of Western hegemony in the neoliberal global order. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this paper investigates the rise of the BRICS group, with the potential of soon becoming the BRICS+; and assesses the extent of their further development and influence from the perspective of IR. Of the many theories involved in the study of international institutions, this article employs those that, on the one hand, are the most influential in the framework of their respective IR theory paradigms and, on the other, represent the most interesting conceptual interpretations of the BRICS. At the end of this article, the analyses portray how traditional body politic challenges the shift of sovereignty from the nation-state toward global governance. In particular, will this norm-making act serve as the symbiotic energy to maintain the political health within our global political ecosystem?

Keywords

International Relations (IR), BRICS, BRICS+, “Birds of a Feather Flock Together”, “New Kid on the Block”, Global Gridlock, UNGA, UNSC, Global Gridlock, Global Political Ecosystem, Challenges of Multilateralism

1. Introduction

The world in the 21st Century is fraught with challenges and uncertainties. There are challenges emanating from the on-going geopolitical war between Ukraine and Russia, the Hamas-Israeli war, the consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic,

climate issues, migration issues, democratic destabilization issues arising from “coup d’états” in Africa, and a whole lot of security uncertainties. But in the midst of all these global uncertainties is the zeal captivated by like-minded countries, who want to find solutions to the global issues. Notwithstanding, there is a glimpse of a global economic recovery under way, even though it is unsteady, where experts believe a recovery is toning down various risks and crises across the world. Amid all of these paradigms is a new phase of turbulence and transformation, involving the annual meetings of the Summit of BRICS—a group of four large emerging economies, who are trying to challenge a shift of sovereignty from the nation-state towards global governance. Originally an informal group of the leading emerging economies of the early 2000s; Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are becoming significant global players during this time of geopolitical uncertainties permeating the world. From an economic and development standpoint the BRICS’ group is expected to achieve a significant Gross Economic Product (GDP) rise in the 21st century. Indeed, with China’s economic growth in recent times, a prediction and changes unseen in a century of acceleration are expected within the grouping. As a group, BRICS is composed of 41.5 percent of the world’s population and 31.6 percent of global GDP. The group meets each year to discuss economic, security, and political cooperation, aimed at increasing their countries’ strength globally. BRICS was formed in 2011, and around the idea of bringing together the four large emerging economies, which are more likely to rise in the 21st century. To implement their objectives, BRICS’ formed a New Development Bank in 2014—a multilateral development bank that has loaned out US\$33 Billion to 96 countries so far, for infrastructure and other projects. BRICS seeks to build developing countries’ resolve, which is often dominated by the so-called developed countries and that of humanity’s hopes for progress and cooperation in international forums such as the United Nations, where debates to resolve world problems are often deadlocked without consensus resulting in gridlock and colossal dysfunction.

Against this backdrop, this article explores the set-up of BRICS and asks: can this “new platform” fulfill and display a “thin” or “thick” multilateral relationship, making use of an English School theoretical framework? At the end of this paper we want to answer the following: whether in the 21st century, the BRICS’ alliance can achieve peace that is eluding the UN amidst war and turbulence in IR. As noted candidly by the Chinese President Xi Jinping; “peace,” “air” and “sunshine” are hardly noticed when we are benefiting from it. But none of us can live without such natural gifts of God. Peace, he insists, is crucial for our future and underpins the common security of all countries” (Abrams, 2022). The critical question then is; can BRICS or the soon-to-be BRICS+ exert any appreciable impact on the G-7—the grouping of the developed countries, who are currently in disarray, and particularly, its current dominance by the U.S as a bipolar? In the attempt to find answers to this question: how should BRICS respond to the call of our times and ride on the trend of history to build a world community

that has a shared future for mankind? Isn't our world in peril and almost in a paralyzed state, where countries attending the 77th UN General Assembly are refusing to cooperate and dialogue on collective problems confronting the world? The reality in the world today is that "we live in a persistent state of insecurity", where the logic of cooperation and dialogue should be the only path forward, according to the UN Secretary-General. In fact, he recalls the end of World War II, when many Western countries came together to participate in the establishment of a family of multilateral institutions under the banner of the United Nations to resolve global problems. But the question is; where is the current gridlock within plenary sessions of the UNGA and the UNSC emanating from? The truth today about the UN is that the world can no more reach consensus at "anything"?

2 The Objectives of BRICS

The underlying objectives of the BRICS are fourfold: 1) to pursue economic, political, and cultural integration of member countries. Economic integration, if boosted to a significant degree, will enable members to achieve sufficient global competitive edge to address global problems faced by all of humanity. 2) to increase its ability to influence the global agenda-setting using political integration tools such as expanding its membership and building a political alliance; 3) to step up economic growth and trade between the BRICS countries by way of intensifying their economic integration and building a full-fledged economic union. Thanks to its growing economic influence and popularity, the BRICS or soon-to-be BRICS+ intends to seek answers to the challenges faced by the world; and finally 4) to maintain the status of a "club of emerging nations" that exists to discuss a global agenda formulated by other countries and supranational alliances (Kuzmin, 2013; Korshunov 2013). Multilateralism has been fundamental to the liberal world order created at the end of World War II. In fact, it has been crucial in maintaining peace and prosperity. It has also been central to the past successes of the G20 in addressing the global financial crisis and promoting international financial stability. But the system is now under serious threat, with its core goals and values challenged from a variety of quarters. The political dissatisfaction with multilateralism in both major advanced industrialized countries (US, Germany, France, Russia, etc) and emerging ones, such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa and Brazil and the global South is associated with the failure of global governance in the post-Bretton Woods system to stem the tide of slow growth, rising inequality, falling labor force participation, rising migration, social fragmentation and job insecurity associated with globalization and automation (Mikhailenko, 2016). In the past two to three decades, it has been widely recognized that the current multilateral system needs to be reformed due to rapid changes in the economic, demographic and political weight of advanced and particularly the emerging economies. But Political rigidities in multilateral organizations charged with overseeing economic globalization—such as the

IMF, World Bank, UN, WTO and others—have prevented adequate reforms. The resulting disillusionment with formal multilateralism has led to the formation of the BRICS in the parallel pursuit of bilateral deals or cooperation that is limited to like-minded or geographically proximate countries. The analysis of this paper is that none of these alternatives—including the BRICS have plausible chances of completely replacing multilateralism. However, a globalized world facing globalized challenges requires an open, rules-based international order to ensure that the system works in the service of all nations and people. What is needed is to find the right balance or mix between true multilateralism, defined as universal rules of the game, and the large number of plurilateral agreements, probably from the United Nations' expected reforms that permit greater flexibility to move an agenda forward, even when universal consensus cannot, or need not be achieved. But the reforms must be now!

3. Statement of the Problem

The emergence of BRICS or BRICS+ (Emerging or Middle Income Countries—into the world scene is as a result of varying bullying tactics by the Western (or so-called developed) countries. Having been at the center of the United Nations (UN) family and the Bretton Woods institutions; the Western countries have been trying to weaken the same organs that brought them to prominence. For instance, in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the U.S. and its Western allies have divided consensus at the UN into different camps. More so, the “West” has imposed unwarranted sanctions that have destabilized the global supply chain and pressured other countries to take sides according to Sun Chengbao, a researcher with the Centre for International Security and Strategy of Tsinghua University (<https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/Opinions/4598>). In addition, the U.S. and some Western countries have gone astray, by creating small “cliques” to maximize their own geopolitical interests, increasing tensions and sowing discord to impede other countries' (such as China and Russia's) co-operation (Leksyutina, 2017). Indeed, the globe is facing widening geopolitical divides and protracted uncertainties; challenges that are confronting the whole world, including gridlock at the UN on ways and means to combat climate change, the continuous havoc of the COVID-19 Pandemic to developing countries due to bureaucracy and “red tape”; the acute food insecurity caused by the war in Europe; the soaring energy prices as a result of the war; and global supply chain disruptions and humanitarian upheavals created by conflicts in Europe and Africa. Due to the stance by the Western nations, pseudo-multilateralism is posing a threat to genuine multilateralism, hence the rush of the emerging economies to form their own group to maintain “true multilateralism” and make innovative plans to strengthen their resilience and efficiency against the Western countries. With the experience at the United Nations, developing countries are tired of the bullying tactics and are now poised for a stronger solidarity among them to pursue and seek out justice and also become pillars of worldwide pro-

motion of development and cooperation as well as safeguard the quality and justice at world forums such as the World Bank (IBDR), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other world institutions.

4. Theoretical Frameworks

The framework adopted in this paper entails economic integration theories that are adjusted to developing countries and focused on issues related to the effects, benefits and constraints of economic integration. The contribution that this paper seeks to make is the systematization of economic theories that can be applied to integration efforts among the BRICS, who are described as “the emerging world powers in the 21st century” (Toloraya et al., 2016; Leksyutina, 2017). Indeed, political and economic integration, as we are all aware, is one of the main trends in the development of international economic relations in the last few decades. The first stage in analyzing such includes the traditional theories of economic integration which explains the possible benefits of integration, hence the static analysis. The second stage includes the new economic integration theories, which are developed in changed economic conditions like those of BRICS and described as dynamic analyses of economic arrangements. Most of the work on BRICS is focused “on their potential,” in economic, terms of the individual countries as far as their impacts on the global economic and financial processes is concerned and in respect of their cooperation with each other to deal with economic, finance, trade and some environmental issues across the world (Toloraya & Chkov, 2016; Nadkarni & Noonan, 2013; Toloraya et al., 2016; Leksyutina, 2017). In such an attempt, therefore, what accounts for the projection of yet another institution of interstate cooperation which fits into a number of already existing structures? As such, will BRICS be a fundamentally different model of relations that can seriously transform the trends in world politics? Or 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 unions? Or will the BRICS provide fundamentally new conditions which may lead to the development of international cooperation as opposed to continued power politics? Can the BRICS be considered “*the new kid on the block*;”—a new mechanism of global governance, or is it nothing more than a temporary intergovernmental arrangement in view of the current geopolitical skirmishes of our time?

5. Theorizing the Study

In this study, we have employed a qualitative approach with a case study research type and descriptive in nature. According to Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research is research that uses a natural setting, with the intention of interpreting phenomena that occur and is carried out by involving various existing methods. A qualitative approach is an important approach to understanding a

social phenomenon and the individual perspective studied. A qualitative approach is also one in which the research procedure produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from the behavior of the people being observed. In this study, we used the case-study type of research. According to Suharsimi Arikunto, a case study is an intensive, detailed and in-depth approach to certain symptoms. The definition of a case study according to Basuki is a form of research or study of a problem that has specific characteristics that can be carried out either with a qualitative or quantitative approach, with individual or group targets, even the wider community.

1) *In global regionalism theory*—BRICS or soon-to-be BRICS+ conceptualizes regional integration as a set of states that are close to each other and have intentions of forming a certain historical, economic, political and sociocultural community (or at least seek to create such a community). According to the theory of “new regionalism” (Lagutina, 2009; Lagutina & Vasilyeva, 2012; Acharya, 2014; Heininen, 2016; Hettne et al., 1999; Van Langenhove, 2011); BRICS or the soon-to-become the BRICS+, is associated with the so-called “global regions”—based on functional, network, identity, multi-actor and multifactor principles rather than on geographic proximity. This is because “global regions” have a cross-cutting nature; as they easily permeate various levels—local, regional and global—to create a completely different type of world politics (Avdokushin, Zharikov, 2013; Meena, 2015). In addition, BRICS, if successful in what they are trying to do, will emerge as a “global region” to be counted among such regional integration schemes as—the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ECOWAS, NAFTA, the AU, the Mercado Común del Sur, the Eurasian Economic Union, etc., etc. Proponents of the theory of global regionalism believe that the soon-to-be BRICS+ is consolidating on a common transnational agenda in order to instill cohesiveness in its membership. Among the most important areas of cooperation of the BRICS countries are the following: (i) improvement of the global financial system; (ii) development of industrial and commercial relations; (iii) energy security (iv) cooperation in the field of climate change and environmental protection; (v) joint research projects; (vi) the fight against cyber-terrorism, and; (vii) coordination of BRICS+ activities in international organizations, particularly within the UN and its specialized agencies—the Bretton Woods Institutions. In support of this global agenda, BRICS has established a network; creating a number of its own financial institutions—the New Development Bank with a capital of \$100 billion and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (\$100 billion as well). In the realization of exerting its influence, China has employed a “multi-actor” and “multifactor” principle, by launching the New Silk Road (or One Belt One Road) project (Batur, 2016; Leksyutina, 2017) as a start of this global regime. At first, the New Silk Road was aimed at the development of a land transport corridor through the territory of Eurasia; but the route has been supplemented by sea routes from East Asia to Europe, both southern (through the Suez Canal) and northern (Northern Sea

Route). At completion, the project is acquiring a truly global dimension, incorporating the Pacific region and South America, where one of the BRICS incoming members (Brazil) is situated. But from the standpoint of the critics of the theory of global regionalism and within the objectives and framework of BRICS, a truly unified agenda is yet to emerge (Leksyutina, 2017). Notwithstanding, there are interesting dimensions to the kind of global networking on display within the group; that is, with rare exceptions, the cooperative ties within BRICS are currently bilateral, and not multilateral. There are also numerous differences between the members of this international (BRICS) group. For instance, there are serious land border and sea border disagreements between India and China, including other territorial disputes between other members that regularly lead to direct military-political confrontations. In a nutshell, it may be too early to form an opinion or make an assessment of the BRICS+ like other similarly situated regional communities—the EU, ECOWAS, ASEAN, among others. For such reasons, we can conclude that the BRICS or the BRICS+; yet to be adored cannot play the truly influential role in world politics and the global economy as it is still too early to predict its effectiveness and coherence.

2) In the application of the *“Power Transition Theory”* or the *“neorealist paradigm,”* first propounded by Organski (1958), and the emergence of BRICS or BRICS+ as a regional grouping, we believe that the group has the potential to change global politics. This is because, in the application of the neorealist approach, changes in the balance of power in world politics happen all the time. This theory considers conflicts and wars; as well as the deadlock at the UN plenary sessions and the lack of consensus at the UN Security Council meetings to be the results of the growing influence of states competing with the dominant powers (Manboah-Rockson & Teng-Zeng, 2024). In this regard, all states have aligned themselves to a set of two outstanding “blocs” or more: those who support the status quo and the “revisionists”. There are countries that may be in between. The powerful bloc includes influential states, such as the United States, Germany, France, Israel, Ukraine, Finland, and Britain, who are moving alongside other semi-powerful states. This bloc is enjoying the advantages of “the established world order” and falls into the “status quo category”. The “revisionists” states, such as China, Iran, Russia, are running along with most developing countries (such as Brazil, Saudi Arabia, among others); dissatisfied with their place and role in international relations. The “revisionist states” favor radical changes in the existing international order, which they see as “unjust”. According to PTT experts—a conservative American think tank, most of the objections and counter-rejections in policy at the UN or the world financial institutions are at the instance of Russia and its allies. In their opinion, the Putin regime is challenging democratic values, as manifested in a combination of disrespect for citizens’ political, civil and economic rights and a weak economy (Acharya, 2014). But with the advent of the Russian-Ukrainian War, experts now believe Russia’s military power and its political and diplomatic influence has created a strategic

challenge to the West and its allies. Of particular reference is the threat to U.S.-friendly countries—such as Israel, Georgia, Poland, the Baltic States, Finland and Sweden; some of who are now running to join NATO. More so, the problem is aggravated by Russia's cooperation with "rogue states," such as Syria, Iran and North Korea (Carafano, 2015). In further employing the PTT, similar evaluations are made of the policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the UN and other international forums (Cheng, 2016). In the emergence of BRICS or BRICS+, we can confidently draw conclusions that the world is going to witness a battle between the "revisionists"—who are considered a source of destabilization in the world order—against the "west," considered the "status-quo" and positive; because they are perceived as performing what can be described as the "protective system functions" in world politics.

6. Discussions

Is BRICS highlighting their innate desire for validation and acceptance?

In a time of "global tensions and gridlock"—such as the Ukraine-Russian war, the territorial conflicts between Turkey and Syria, Azerbaijan against Armenia, Israel versus Hamas, United States against Russian and China, the West versus the Rest, democracy versus autocracy in Africa—any event such as the grouping of BRICS raises eye-brows and viewed exclusively through these prisms (Freedom House, 2020). BRICS or BRICS+ is discussed here, with reference to "birds of a feather flocking together" in the midst of frequent bad weather conditions around the world. The phrase is not just an observation of avian behavior, but a profound commentary on human nature. The proverb is a timeless and popular one that encapsulates the human tendency to seek companionship and identify with those who share similar interests, ideas, or values. The phrase has its origin from the observable behavior of birds, which has profound implications for the understanding of social behavior and group dynamics in our world today. This phenomenon is not limited to birds; but a fundamental aspect of many species' survival strategies, including human beings. Indeed, the BRICS or soon-to-be BRICS+ see themselves as the same species who want to flock together for mutual benefits, such as protection from predators or collective foraging from the "Western powers". Its metaphorical application to human society is far more nuanced; as it prompts us to reflect on our social choices and their implications, encouraging us to strike a balance between the comfort of familiarity and the enriching challenge of diversity. It suggests that individuals gravitate toward groups they feel "a sense of belonging". From a sociological perspective, this proverb underscores the concept of homophile, which suggests that social networks are often formed by individuals with common traits. In a sense, the group—BRICS are highlighting their innate desire for validation and acceptance. Hence, BRICS want to find comfort in the company of those who mirror their thoughts and actions, as the group reinforces its self-concept and reduces its cognitive dissonance—a tendency that inhibits personal growth and limits ex-

posure to diverse perspectives.

Global Regionalism Theory versus the Power Transition Theory (PTT)

Dwelling on the recent developments at the United Nations and the gridlock, amidst global dysfunction at the Security Council, this study presents a nuanced analysis of the complex dialectical relationship between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces in today's world. The first section sets the stage by discussing the rise and decline of the US-led Western hegemony and its implications for both the modern world system and the Western-sponsored order in global affairs. Broadly, this section draws on theories of systemic cycles of accumulation (or hegemonic transitions) and hegemonic stability, applying them to the power reconfiguration taking place in today's world. The second section focuses on the global power shift accompanying the rise of BRICS countries and the future of the Western-sponsored modern world system. The main concern here is to present the swift development of BRICS countries into dominant actors in the international economy and evaluate their positions in the midst of the declining US-led world order. The analyses places BRICS' potential at the global and regional levels by emphasizing their interest formations, foreign policy priorities, and geostrategic alignments to fight injustices and other menaces' in the world. Analyzing selective economic indicators on trade and investment this research reveals that traditional power centres no longer have monopolies on patronage, as the role and involvement of BRICS has grown very fast in the world. Accordingly, the repercussions of the rise of BRICS on geopolitical and geostrategic equations in the world show that the rise of BRICS triggers radical transformations that will, henceforth challenge long-standing geopolitical equations in the world such as the formation of a new security framework, the rise of new regional powers, the evolution of alternative developmental trajectories for countries in the region, and new incentives for South-South cooperation

7. The Challenges of Multilateralism to BRICS

In the world today, the global and interconnected character of the 21st century calls for solutions transcending national borders. There is a need for renewed multilateralism that would be based on an integrated approach as opposed to the traditional thematic clustering and isolated handling of global problems; in fact, the need to embrace the concept of global public goods, and promote the effective use of partnerships with multiple state and non-state stakeholders. Indeed, the very notion of sovereignty is currently being affected by world multiple crises, and the renewed multilateralism should first and foremost be conducive to the shaping of more effective and equitable global governance structures. There are at least two main areas where the challenges to multilateralism can be identified: the first is *the concepts*, the second *the methods* and probably, the third *the institutions*. First, concepts are becoming volatile and eroded by problems of

global dimension that have to be handled over national borders. Some examples include national sovereignty versus human rights concerns or international criminal justice decisions, environmental and health problems. We have reached the critical level in so far as international public law is concerned—such as the number of international conventions that have multiplied over the past few decades. Second, the existing institutions—such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Bank (IMF), and the various regional banking systems—which do not reflect the increasing role of regionalism and the changing balance of power. For example, there is gridlock at the most recent sessions of UNGA’77 of 2022 and UNGA’78 of 2023 of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), where the problems of the world cannot find solutions by the plenary sessions of the UN (Manboah-Rockson, & Teng-Zeng, 2024). The call for reforms to the Security Council is still being discussed after several years of the problem of inadequate voting rights of emerging and African economies in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, despite recent progress. Therefore, the rapid emergence of new global players such as BRICS has profound implications on negotiations and international governance. Hence, the emerging powers (BRICS) may be building alliances and common positions in various international fora, which must not be misconstrued as shifts in ideology that can threaten world coexistence. It is in this right that African countries have increasingly realized that they can also better defend their interests when they speak with one voice in world fora. In fact, the international governance system is outdated, both in terms of the distribution of power among the states and its essentially state-based nature. It is no wonder for countries these days, to raise issues that lead to major gridlocks in all the main negotiated areas. Indeed, multilateralism has become more complex today than ever before.

Can BRICS Reshape Global Governance?

There is a growing scholarly contention that the alleged decline of the US-led hegemony parallels the ascendance of BRICS countries on the international stage (see inter alia Stuenkel, 2015; Kiely, 2015; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Against this backdrop, the debate over the “decline of the West” and the “rise of the rest” seems to have polarized international relations scholars into two broad camps. While some critical scholars (Kiely, 2015; Bond, 2015; Fontes, 2015), see the very success of BRICS as being deeply entwined with the prevailing US-led capitalist order, others (Bello, 2014; Desai, 2013; Stuenkel, 2015; van der Pijl, 2006), embrace a more enthusiastic stance and celebrate the rise of the BRICS as a possible challenge and alternative to the US-led and Western-dominated global order, as they seek to have more power and influence in global governance, with demands for the established powers to alter rules and standards accordingly. Even though the study proclaims that the rise of BRICS generates new geopolitics in the region, a counter-hegemonic structure is not forming because BRICS nations are not yet in a prime position to mould the norms, ideas, institutions, and rules of

the current regional order. Therefore, this study conceptualizes the rise of BRICS as a “within-system” challenge, unveiling the changes in power politics and geopolitical equations in the global arena that will be triggered by this power shift.

The BRICS group or the BRICS+ wants to reshape global governance by (i) increasing trade in local currencies, (ii) to reform the United Nations and International Monetary Fund to better accommodate the aspirations of emerging countries, (iii) align positions on global issues such as on agriculture, health, and sustainable development. BRICS or its expanded version, seeks to supplement and reform existing international institutions that are deemed to be unresponsive to their interests. BRICS or BRICS+ does not seek to challenge or replace existing groupings such as the G20. But moving forward, the group’s expanded membership could be a double-edged sword. One reason is clear; the incorporation of U.S. allies such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia alongside countries ambivalent or opposed to the United States could frustrate efforts at deepening cooperation between BRICS member-states. Therefore, the members would need to decide if BRICS is to be a bloc of emerging economies seeking to promote their interests in a multipolar world order or adopt a more explicitly anti-West orientation; of the two, the latter is preferred by China and Russia.

8. BRICS: The Focus of Multipolarity and Multilateralism

The growing economic weight of the BRICS members merits demands for a larger role in economic governance reforms. The defense of multilateralism is a core characteristic of BRICS foreign policy, except on rare occasions. In this context, BRICS should be understood as a constructive platform to contribute to the reform of multilateral institutions. The BRICS countries want more power in multilateral decisions that guarantees a greater degree of domestic autonomy or flexibility (or both) in their respective development agendas. Lavelle correctly dates the beginning of this process to the Council of Europe, which entered the scene in 1815 to settle disputes and keep the peace among great powers in the wake of the revolutionary wars unleashed by Napoleon (Toloraya et al., 2016; Leksyutina, 2017). Later, the horrors of the Crimean war and the Italian war of independence motivated activists to develop new humanitarian institutions to oversee the treatment of the sick and wounded, and to regulate warfare. At the same time, the expansion of globalization generated new multilateral arrangements for the management of trade and finance. There are reasons for these: among them are the following; (i) the need to expand—this signifies a growing alignment of geopolitical and economic agendas within BRICS. It incorporates major global oil producers near crucial trade chokepoints, such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-al Mandab Strait. India, Iran, and Russia are already developing the International North-South Transport Corridor. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two of the world’s largest oil and gas exporters, supply most of China’s energy imports. Brazil, the last BRICS member

to approve the expansion, specifically requested Argentina's inclusion, which was reportedly a precondition for Brazil agreeing to the expansion as a whole. As the host, South Africa successfully negotiated the inclusion of two African countries, strengthening its on-going efforts to promote integration, development, and growth through the African Continental Free Trade Area.

9. Is Multilateralism Still a Panacea for Our World?

It is important to distinguish the assault on multilateralism by world powers from other adverse trends that we have been witnessing. One of the issues under consideration is the rise in authoritarianism and presidential dictatorship which has been occurring at the same time. From the year 2019, there has been a decline—fourteenth consecutive times in global freedoms according to Freedom House (Freedom House, 2020). Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index for 2019 reveals that democratic rights around the globe are at their lowest point since the survey was first launched in 2006 (Democracy Index, 2019). More so, of the 165 countries that the EIU surveyed, only 22 are “full democracies,” while more than a third live under authoritarianism. But it is important to distinguish authoritarianism from challenges to multilateralism because authoritarianism is not necessarily incompatible with multilateralism. Another exception that we want to give about challenges to multilateralism is that multilateralism is not necessarily, in all cases, a good thing. For instance, in 1956 Egypt was invaded by Britain, France, and Israel—in the Suez Canal Crisis. Though it was an act of multilateralism the act was not a good thing (and not because it failed). Another instance was the 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the United States, Britain, Australia, and Poland, said to be an act of multilateralism; but it too was not a good thing (Giurlando, 2023). Sometimes multilateralism is just a cover for great powers “to do not-so-great things” that they would find awkward to do entirely on their own (Glen, 2006). The so-called “big powers” act in a multilateral manner is because multilateralism confers varying degrees of legitimacy even if that legitimacy is sometimes only on paper and without evidence to the facts (Glen, 2006). As such, multilateralism is not a panacea and multilateral organizations are not without their weaknesses—in fact, some of them are very serious (Caplan, 2021). In fact, it is an illusion to think that many of the advances that humanity has made—for instance, the eradication of smallpox and polio, the dramatic reduction of the ozone hole, the lifting of millions of people out of poverty, the elimination of entire classes of lethal weapons, and many others—could have been achieved by states acting on their own (Giurlando, 2023). And it is also an illusion to think that many of the critical challenges that we are confronted with and lie ahead—biodiversity, cyber security, global warming, mass migration, arms proliferation, and the regulation of outer space, as well as the spread of infectious diseases, among others; yet to be deliberated upon at the UN—can be met without states and peoples cooperating more closely. Indeed, multilateralism is a mechanism, or if we like the panacea

for fostering greater openness and transparency in international relations, making information about the activities of governments, the private sector and international organizations easily and readily available.

10. Is the Global South's Demand for "Reforms to Multilateralism" the Panacea?

The existing multilateral system, established after World War II, excluded over 750 million people living under colonial rule from participating in the process. It was only after India gained independence in 1947 that former colonial countries, known as the Global South, were able to join the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The Global South's agenda in multilateral institutions focuses on consolidating sovereignty, protecting territorial integrity, and creating a supportive external environment for socio-economic development (Glen, 2006). But the Global South wants to reform multilateralism. Among the aims of the global South is (i) to rectify institutional biases in decision-making structures, particularly in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). (ii) To increase the number of countries with veto powers, this is currently held by the five permanent members of the UNSC (China, France, Russia, the UK, and USA). This veto is often used to further their geopolitical interests at the expense of the Global South; (iii) to eliminate the weighted quota governance system of the IMF that allows Western economic powers to impose conditions on Global South countries; (iv) to make reforms to the IMF's decision-making system that has have also been delayed since 2008, despite the voluntary contributions of Global South countries during the 2008 financial crisis (Toloraya et al., 2016). Indeed, reforms are seriously required due to the dysfunctionality of the UNSC and characterized by increased confrontation among the permanent members (Guterres 2023). Besides, there is a significant increase in the number of people impacted by violent conflicts due to the UN Secretary-General's preventive diplomacy system that has been ineffective in addressing conflicts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. More so, the rise of confrontational regionalism, protectionist measures, unilateral economic sanctions, and the weaponization of globalization poses additional threats to multilateralism. In our research in this direction, the global South's reforms are justified. There is a strong proof that the emergence of BRICS+ can strengthen the global South's chances of getting "breakthroughs" at future UNGA plenary sessions or an opportunity to have amendments to the UN Charter to reconstitute the UN Security Council (Glen, 2006). In the nutshell, humanity has proven unprepared for the global challenges of this era. Instead of jointly seeking answers to the challenges and international tensions of our time, we see attempts to hold back the natural course of history at all costs, aiming to retain the old mechanisms of global governance in the hands of a limited number of states for a single purpose: to continuously allow them to keep their global influence intact.

11. What is the Way Forward of Multilateralism?

In the assessment of the current prospects for multilateralism, we must admit that it has not yet become an overriding idea in the international political environment or in the global public conscience. But we are witnessing the rise of isolationism in many states, which inevitably limits their engagement in multilateral structures and regimes—the norms and practices that can help successfully build and foster multilateralism. This applies first and foremost to the major powers, as it is these powers that largely shape the climate in global affairs. In order to stop the negative dynamics in international affairs and prevent a slide into uncontrollability and chaos, it is necessary that an increase in the number of actors in global politics and world economy be accompanied by an increase in the density of the existing network of multilateral international agreements, regimes and organizations. This network can ultimately create the legal framework, instruments of control and horizontal communications that would prevent global politics from falling into a deep crisis.

First, under a multilateral approach, shared values should not be a precondition for reaching an agreement. Only a convergence of interests can be deemed necessary and sufficient. In other words, multilateral mechanisms set up to resolve common problems should not be used to interfere in the internal affairs of states and change their political system, economic model, or any of their norms. The multilateralism of the 21st century can only be universal and effective if it is suitable for the world of value, political and economic pluralism.

Second, states must learn to recognize equality of all actors in multilateral formats. Naturally, different nations cannot be fully equal on many formal counts. Nevertheless, they must respect the principle of “equality”, understood as “equality of all before the law,” as this law is enshrined in the UN Charter. This principle, for instance, was largely responsible for the success of the Helsinki Process during the Cold War and, as well the “gridlocks” during the UNGA’77 and ’78 of 2022 and 2023 (Manboah-Rockson, & Teng-Zeng, 2024).

Third, cooperation can be successful if it is mutually beneficial; meaning that, it can prove the effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms for individual actors in the international system. In other words, it is necessary to respect the vital interests of other states – both members and formally non-members of multilateral entities – and to motivate these states to expand cooperation. A good example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: starting with regulating cross-border cooperation, it has gradually grown into one of the largest regional organizations with a broad agenda, ranging from security and economy to combating terrorism and other threats.

Fourth, states must strictly abide by international law. But international law (s) cannot remain unchanged in a rapidly changing world. Many international legal norms need to be devised or revised. However, improving the norms of international law should not be the privilege of any particular group of states: universal norms are to be negotiated and agreed on in multilateral formats by all

international actors (Caplan, 2021).

Finally, countries must recognize the importance of cooperation as the best way to pursue a win-win strategy in an interdependent world. This principle applies above all to security, as all countries, especially the nuclear powers, need to realize that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Parties must commit themselves to refrain from the use of force as well as the threat of its use. There are sufficient statements made to this effect, but few real steps have been taken to reduce such tensions (Glen, 2006).

Indeed, the list of suggestions put forward here is not a complete list of pre-conditions under which multilateralism can successfully develop and meet the relevant challenges. In fact, we could place only one condition; which is “*the political will*” of nations and above all, of the great powers—Britain, the United States of America, Russia, France and China, that can largely determine the current international agenda (Caplan, 2021). But without a fundamental change in the nature of relations between the great powers and particularly those within the BRICS or the soon-to-be BRICS+, we can expect a multiplication of political, social, economic and global climate risks, gridlocks and disagreements that wait to overwhelm the world in the 21st century.

12. Conclusion

The BRICS’ group formation is aimed at reshaping global governance by introducing the trade in local currencies; to inject reforms into the United Nations and International Monetary Fund, for such world financial institutions to better accommodate the aspirations of emerging countries. This is believed can align positions usually voted on as global issues, such as on agriculture, health, and sustainable development. The various research findings continue to highlight that while the BRICS seek to supplement and reform existing international institutions that are deemed to be unresponsive to their interests, they do not seek to challenge or replace existing groupings such as the G20. In our findings, however, we believe that moving forward, the group’s (expected) expansion in membership can be a double-edged sword. For instance, the incorporation of U.S. allies such as the United of Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia alongside countries ambivalent or opposed to the United States can frustrate efforts at deepening cooperation between BRICS’ member-states. In such a related move, members would need to decide (now or later), if BRICS is to be a bloc of emerging economies seeking to promote their interests in a multipolar world order or intend to adopt a more explicitly anti-West orientation; the latter of which is preferred by China and Russia (Mikhailenko, 2016). But at least we are reminded that the world’s multilateralism is based on its founding principles such as consultation, inclusion and solidarity. These principles are outlined in the UN charter, which remains the “moral compass to promote peace, advance human dignity, prosperity and uphold human rights and the rule of law,” as Secretary-General António Guterres recently reiterated on the plenary of the UNGA

of 2022 (Guterres 2023). In the 21st Century, we are inundated with unprecedented crises, and it is crucial that we find ways to strengthen and rebuild trust in the global system's ability to equitably distribute resources and adequately address global challenges (Modeer & Tyegaye, 2023). The multilateral system, even in the face of heightened geopolitical tension and big power rivalry, remains the "uniquely inclusive vehicle" for managing "mutual interdependencies" in ways that enhance national and global welfare. The complex challenges of a global pandemic, climate emergency, inequality and the risk of nuclear conflict cannot be dealt with by one country or one region alone. As such, a coordinated collective action is always required. Notwithstanding the institutional and bureaucratic challenges that are bedeviling multilateralism, efforts must be made to address them head-on (Abrams, 2022). But "no", a retreat now from a shared system of rules and norms that have served the world for seven decades is the wrong diversion by the BRICS (Wallace, 1973). A reform to multilateralism is the way forward and should be the demand of BRICS group. Because the multilateral system we have today, even in the face of heightened geopolitical tension and big power rivalry, remains the uniquely inclusive vehicle for managing mutual interdependencies in ways that enhance national and global welfare. In the 21st century, we will be witnessing a fierce struggle for a new arrangement of the world order that would reflect the new realities taking shape in the world. What we may see is the reinforcement of sovereignty and the consolidation of national consciousness in the vast majority of states, favoring new centers of geopolitical and economic influence.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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