

Leadership from below?: A Strategic Alignment of BRICS at the G20 or Simply Business as Usual

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G20 Summit – Media Centre. There has been much written about the rise of BRICS and its leadership potential as a new policy actor which can offer an alternative to the traditional Bretton Woods system in global politics. As part of this literature, the leadership potential of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) rests on the fact that they collectively own 20% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), have a combined GDP to that of the United States of America, represent 40% of the global population, and occupy 25% of the world's landmass. This potential still remains present despite recent downturns in overall BRICS economic growth, since the BRICS still represent the promise of maintaining faster economic growth rates than most Western states and continue to advance themselves in terms of both soft power and hard power globally.

In addition, the BRICS have now underwritten the New Development Bank (NDB), which many analysts suggest represents an alternative to the World Bank and IMF. As an initial pledge, China will provide \$41 billion, Russia \$18 billion, and South Africa \$5 billion. This amount is promised to be bolstered with an additional \$50 billion as the bank starts to ramp up. The idea behind the bank is to promote infrastructure and sustainable development projects within the developing world. Although both the president of the NDB (K.V. Kamath) and the World Bank (Jim Yong Kim) have recently stated that the NDB is a 'complimentary institution' to the World Bank and not a substitute, many commentators see the NDB as a means to promote a new kind of 'South-South' development cooperation and a way to break development dependencies often associated with

‘business as usual.’ As many have suggested, the BRICS lexicon posits a more cooperative tone in regards to assisting development and the BRICS seemingly attach fewer conditionalities on their development assistance.

There are also a few clear cases of the BRICS bonding together to protect the primary interest of one of their members. In particular, last March the BRICS all abstained from a UN General Assembly resolution reaffirming Ukraine’s territorial integrity. In addition, the BRICS banded together to release a BRICS Summit statement condemning the sanctions imposed on Russia. In these cases, the BRICS might be viewed as offering a different kind of political concert to those usually orchestrated by the West and thus, in theory, the BRICS offer an alternative position for forging a more anti-Washington consensus.

One further potentiality of the BRICS as a formidable global policy leader comes from the fact that all five BRICS countries are members of the G20 and can therefore align interests in such a way as to influence

and reshape G20 outcomes. In the past this alignment has not occurred explicitly within the context of the G20, with the BRICS opting to use their annual BRICS Summits as a means to coordinate policy interests. Yet, attempts to form a more coordinated G20 strategy for BRICS could now become precedent, since the leaders of the BRICS formally met in advance of the Leaders Summit in Antalya with the specific aim to articulate mutual interest and to agree to a common negotiation strategy and caucus.

In many ways this meeting represents an interesting development in regards to the global leadership role the BRICS might play. When compared to other trade related multilateral groupings like the North American Free Trade Agreement - where the USA, Mexico and Canada are all also members of the G20 - the BRICS align interests in more formal and strategic way. In fact, although meetings between selective heads of state often occur prior to the G20, the BRICS is unusual, since it is clearly acting more like a political organization aimed to create long-term policy influence and less like an ad hoc

grouping of interests. As a result, this recent G20 development not only increases the potential relevance of the BRICS, but it also increases its potential to counterbalance the hegemony of the USA and the 'global north.'

Moreover, the BRICS summits themselves act as an interesting alternative forum to the G20 since the BRICS agenda often covers and expands upon the same areas that are usually discussed at the G20 Summit (trade, the global economy, inclusive growth, sustainable development, employment, the environment, health, terrorism, energy, financial regulation, and international tax). Discussing these areas in advance does three things in relation to providing potential leadership. First, it allows for the BRICS to quickly align their group strategy prior to the G20, since many of the key issues to be discussed at the G20 have been worked out in advance. As a result, the meeting immediately before the G20 becomes a moment to reconfirm agreement and to think strategically in relation to the evolving G20 agenda versus working out a position from scratch.

Second, it allows the BRICS to represent an alternative voice in the G20 debate, since the BRICS illustrate that a 'different form of collective leadership' can not only be maintained, but also potentially advanced. Third, this portrayal of a 'different form of leadership' can act as a rallying cry to other non-G20 countries, which have grown increasingly weary of what is often called 'The Washington Consensus.' In effect, and if convincingly done, the BRICS have an opportunity to garner support from other developing countries and thus further a global position in opposition to Western driven global governance.

However, a number of reasons exist to temper the enthusiasm behind the image of BRICS as a 'different form of leadership'. This dampening stems from the fact that the BRICS have so far been more about occasional alignment on trade and security, than producing any robust and coherent policy strategy that has teeth. For the most part, the key identity marker of the BRICS is that they are not the West. Although this is clearly a workable Hegelian politics of 'the other', this alone does not represent a robust policy package and

more will be needed in terms of substance and committed practice before the BRICS will have the policy traction needed to claim the title of having leadership. Claims of leadership, to be taken seriously, demands follow-through and action, otherwise it will be seen to offer no alternative to existing forms of ‘business as usual.’

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the BRICS are big on words and lite on substance when the actions of each BRICS state is analyzed in terms of their bilateral agreements with non-BRICS countries. This will hamper enthusiasm for the BRICS as representing a visibly ‘practiced’ alternative to the Bretton Woods system and thus limit the claim that the BRICS represent a different form of leadership from below. For example, a recent study of the role of BRICS processes upon health development in Eastern and Southern Africa found that although there were grand statements made by the BRICS concerning development strategies with Africa – ones that claimed to be ‘equal and mutually beneficial’ with ‘structural cooperation’ as a reform goal - the analysis

of 39 agreements between BRICS countries and African states from 2008 to 2014 were overwhelmingly focused on India and China’s pharmaceutical access to African markets versus the creation of a long-term ‘partnership’ for health development in Africa. As a result, there is credible evidence to suggest that when it comes to how BRICS Summits affect the actions of their individual bilateral agreements, at the moment, it fails to resemble a radically new kind of development politics from below.

Moreover, the idea that the BRICS share a collective conscience on the G20 agenda items or on foreign policy more broadly would be an incredible overstatement. This is because the foreign policy aims between the BRICS countries differ wildly on a number of key issues and there are noticeable areas of contention between certain BRICS members. For example, both India and China still contest large parts of their shared border and the area remains a militarized zone. Furthermore, India is slowly repositioning its foreign policy to be more USA friendly than it has in the past, both to help counter China’s regional

dominance as well as to maintain its economic success. Relatedly, Russia has a number of economic and security concerns of its own relating to China and there exist a number of delicate issues that continue to hasten fuller cooperation and alignment on big-ticket items relating to security and regional policy. Again, as suggested above, the BRICS Summits tend to focus on clear cases of mutual benefit in trade and security versus representing a solid political mechanism to tackle more contentious issues.

This also suggests another aspect of BRICS that limits itself as a potentially different form of leadership. At the moment, the need for the BRICS to look unified in its alternative vision for global development actually undermines its effectiveness as a forum to work through the deeply political issues that otherwise go ignored (but clearly need greater global leadership). In other words, in an attempt to look as if speaking with one voice, the dirtiness of politics is sidestepped and creates a situation where the hard issues are left wanting for real debate, dialogue and hard fought policy agreement. As a result, the

BRICS can often look more like cheerleaders searching for a collective identity versus able or willing to invest the hard political and economic maneuvering required to advance global reform. This also means, that in the end, the most capable leadership actor remains the USA, like it or not.

Lastly, although the predictions claiming an economic downfall of BRICS are overblown, there are nevertheless clear signs that the BRICS economic position has significantly weakened of late, and thus reason to believe that poor performance represents more than a stutter, although still short of a fall. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that continued economic problems can only translate into a weakened position as a viable leadership actor, which can again only bolster the position of the USA. Moreover, there are fractures that can arise from China's significant economic position compared to other BRICS members (China's economic output is twice that of the rest of the BRICS members combined), which could undermine the BRICS when China's

interests are viewed to be better served elsewhere.

It is for these reasons that despite the BRICS meeting prior to the G20, the BRICS could only release a rather weak leader's statement that made no references to the ongoing refugee crisis affecting G20 member states and that could only offer a general passage condemning the terrorist attacks in Paris and advocating counter-terrorism cooperation. Again, where the clearest BRICS position emerged at the G20 was in relation to the need to promote economic growth. As stated within the BRICS leader's release, 'economic recovery was not yet sustainable' advocating a better focus on the 'importance of strengthening macroeconomic policy coordination and cooperation among G20

members to avoid negative spillovers, and to achieve strong, sustainable and balanced growth.'

In this way the BRICS offered very little in terms of representing 'a different form of leadership' that could more effectively address the list of global collective action problems on the G20 agenda... instead looking remarkably like 'business as usual', with the key word being its usual focus on 'business.'

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