BRICS and its Relevance through a theoretical lens: Analysing Global Politics since 2006

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Abstract

Global politics since 2006 has witnessed many twists and turns. It has seen the economic depression of 2009 highlighted by the Euro-debt and Crimean crises. The jobless growth in many developed capitalist countries has forced us to see the period as the crisis of capitalism. The lack of representation, transparency and accountability at Bretton Woods institutions has called for finding alternatives. Together with economic churning, political protests, uprisings and armed rebellions have marked the political sphere in many countries, especially the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. The fissures and fault lines in the political and economic spheres have developed cracks in the social and cultural fabrics of the global society. These developments called for relooking at global politics in both theory and practice. In this background, at first in 2006, the four emerging economies of the world - Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) come together. Later, South Africa join them in 2010. In a decade and a half of its existence, BRICS as a grouping has raised questions like whether cooperation between competing economies is possible. It has expanded the narrative around the feasibility of having an alliance between democratic and non-democratic political regimes. With the rise of China, the question of how this non-West coalition is going to engage with its members and the larger global political

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economy has gained momentum. The intra- members' cooperation and conflicts within BRICS will define the contours of future global politics. Therefore, this article is an attempt to trace the journey of BRICS since 2006 and to measure its relevance in contemporary global politics through various theories in international relations. We argue that a combination of constructivism and post/decolonial theories will be helpful to redefine the role of BRICS in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *BRICS, Realism, Neo-liberal institutionalism, Constructivism and Post/Decolonial theory.*

As the world's growing economies faced disproportionate representation in the post second world war international trade and finance institutions, countries like Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) come together. Their vision is to have multilateral arrangements in the three areas of contemporary global politics: political and security; economic and financial; and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. For the first time, BRIC leaders met in St. Petersburg, Russia, on the margins of the G8 Outreach Summit in July 2006. Soon thereafter, in September 2006, the group was formalised as BRIC during the first BRIC Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held on the sidelines of the General Debate of the UN Assembly in New York City. This was followed by a series of high-level meetings and the first BRIC summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia on 16 June 2009. South Africa showed keen interest to join the BRIC and was accepted as a full member at the BRIC Foreign Ministers' meeting in New York in September 2010. Consequently, South Africa attended the third BRICS Summit in Sanya, China on 14 April 2011. Thus, BRIC became BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

As per the World Bank data (2019), BRICS is coming together of the major emerging economies of the world, comprising 41% of the world population, 24% of the world GDP, the total combined area of 29.3% of the total land surface of the world and over 16% share in the world trade. Therefore, BRICS is a powerful grouping in the neo-liberal global political economy. However, understanding the actual functioning of the grouping and its potential in the future needs deeper theoretical analysis. In this paper, we are trying to understand BRICS through four theoretical lenses: Realism, Neo-liberal institutionalism, Constructivism and Post/Decolonial theory. At the beginning itself, we are submitting to the fact that in the practical experience of BRICS, these theories overlap and co-exist. At different junctures, BRICS symbolises different things to different people. Therefore, the effort made in this paper is to see BRICS through various theoretical lenses and see different meanings attached to it to measure its relevance.

REALISM

Predominantly, whenever we speak about theories in international relations it begins with Realism. It is one of the oldest ways to understand international relations. Realism calls for the intellectual foundation for realpolitik. This school evolved as an academic branch after First World War and strengthened after Second World War. Two works are seen as turning points in popularising this perspective. They are E.H. Carr's (1939) The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919 – 1939 and Hans Morgenthau's (1948) Politics Among Nations. Over the years, Realism evolved and has various branches. The three main branches of Realism are Classical Realism, Neo-Realism and English Realism.

When we look through Classical Realism, the inter-state system is a self-help system where the main actors are a 'sovereign, rational state'. As the international system is anarchical in nature, sovereign rational states pursue their national interests by accumulating maximum military power. In this maximization of power, war becomes a recurring phenomenon. Here, the power is about 'power over' other states and the interaction between states is seen as a 'zero-sum game'. BRICS's existence itself challenges realist notions of power. BRICS symbolises the coming together of four emerging economies, trying to prioritise their economic interests over political compulsions. For Classical Realism, BRICS is an experiment doomed to fail as cooperation for a larger good (other than self-national interest) between sovereign rational states has no place in international relations. For example, the boundary dispute between India and China or the boundary dispute between Russia and China are not yet resolved by the fact that they are members of the BRICS. The constant tension in the border areas between India and China has made war a constant possibility. The multiple rounds of negotiations have failed to resolve the issue and reach a common ground. In the recently concluded twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), it was reiterated that CPC strives for achieving a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This strengthens the realist reading of international relations that sovereign states pursue and prioritise national interests. This also highlights the fact that international relations are not an arena of morality and there is the autonomy of the political in determining relations between the states.

Improvising Morgenthau's realist thoughts, Kenneth Waltz (2008) proposes a neo-realist theory that the focus of study in international relations should be the structure and not the singular sovereign states. Waltz emphasises the fact that the international system is a structure and two important processes are competition and socialisation. In this, the internal character of states is irrelevant. The causation of balance of power runs from system to state and not vice versa. For Waltz, power is a means and not an end to sustain the system. In

this, the states are not power maximisers but security maximisers. When we study the origin of BRICS, we realise that it is the systemic changes like the decline in the influence of the USA and the increasing economic vulnerability of the European states that brought these five emerging economies together. However, this socialisation and coming together has not ended competition between the member states of BRICS. Not only in the political domain but also in the economic sphere the members of BRICS have not resolved their competitive interests. For example, in 2019, Brazil along with Australia and Guatemala took India into the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism asserting that India's domestic support measures to sugarcane farmers and sugar and export subsidies extended to them are inconsistent with global trade rules including many provisions of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture, Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). On 14 December 2021, the WTO dispute panel ruled in favour of Brazil, Australia and Guatemala and asked India to withdraw its high level of subsidies extended to sugarcane farmers. It is interesting to note that Brazil opted to take the case to the WTO dispute panel rather than using the platform of BRICS for bilateral negotiations to resolve the issue with India. This highlights the fact that members of BRICS are having similar products to offer to the global market and in maximising profit, they are competitors and not collaborators. The BRICS has failed to resolve internal trade conflicts among the members.

Another branch of the realist school evolved that could see the limitations of realism and neo-realism. The English realism advocated by Hedley Bull (1977, pp. 9-21) highlights the fact that institutions are important to impart constitutive rules and regulative rules in international relations. Bull cites that institutions act as a platform for interactions between states. For him, sovereignty is constituted through the interaction of states and not before that. The idea of sovereignty is depended upon how other states perceive you. Sovereignty cannot be claimed in a unilateral and isolated manner. English realism also affirms the role of institutions to strengthen moral and normative dimensions of the international laws that guide the rules of both warfare and diplomacy. In this direction, the role of BRICS is crucial not only for its members but for the larger world. In contemporary global politics, the rivalry between the West and Non-West can be effectively moulded through the platform of BRICS. It is also assumed that Russia and China are using BRICS as a platform to further their authoritarian designs in the name of challenging the predominance of the West over world trade (Armijo 2007, pp. 7-42). In the context of the Crimean crisis of 2014, the EU imposed sanctions on oil imported from Russia. It was a big jolt to the market interests of Russia in Europe. However, BRICS gave solace to Russia as China was ready to fill in as the market for oil (Cooper 2016). In this incident, we could see the solidarity of Russia and China in

fighting the western forces but also how BRICS as a platform is forging stronger relations between some of its members and leaving others in the periphery. The English school of realism underlines the fact that the lack of laws and norms to bind and govern the world is one of the reasons for increasing war between states and the evolution of institutions can help in creating and strengthening international norms. Here we could see that BRICS is creating an alternative norm structure to that of the West. BRICS is crucial in extending the belief that a more inclusive, democratic and transparent world structure is possible, especially for the latecomers of global development (Kirk 2015, pp. 609-622).

NEO-LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Neo-liberal institutionalism came as a challenge to realism in the 1970s. The work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (2001, pp. 217-18) primarily questions the three elements of realists, namely the assumption of states being unitary and rational actors; force as a useful tool in international relations and the significance of military power in setting the hierarchy of states and their survival. Keohane and Nye introduce the concept of 'Complex Interdependence' to argue that there exist multiple points of contact between multiple actors in international relations. The state is not the sole actor in international politics. For them, the military force cannot always dictate the terms of global politics. They recognise the importance of soft power and non-military issues in international politics. Therefore, they emphasise the need for global institutions to evolve and strengthen international norms. Like English realism, Neo-liberal institutionalism places institutions as important platforms for interactions.

Through the lens of Neo-liberal institutionalism, BRICS is a relevant platform. According to Ren Lin and Yin Jiwu (2020), the origin of BRICS cooperation can be traced to multiple external and internal factors. For them, the external and internal factors can be further subdivided into functional and normative ones. The external functional factors triggering cooperation among BRICS countries in the initial years were the power structure of the international system and the international institutional environment where emerging economies as 'latecomers' had lesser representation and voting rights in the decision-making processes of institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and World Trade Organisation (WTO). The external normative factors helping this grouping were the payoff culture for repeated cooperation and the urge to develop fairer international norms and practices. The internal functional factors for this collaboration were the number of actors shaping global politics and the complementarity. It was clear by the early 2000s that the unilateral hegemony of the United States of America is waning in the global political

economy. BRICS is seen as a platform by emerging economies for multi-layered alignment to enhance global presence. The internal normative factors for this alliance were the reasoning of homogeneity of all countries as non-West and the scope for mutual consensuses to challenge and provide an alternative to the Western paradigm in engaging with issues like economy, environment and terrorism (Lin and Jiwu 2020, pp. 43-67).

The BRICS recognises the power of economic cooperation and collaboration in defining the global politics of the day. By recognising the limitations of the Bretton Woods System, the idea of the New Development Bank was proposed at the fourth BRICS Summit (2012) to finance the BRICS association for sustainable development of projects and infrastructure and help other emerging economies and developing countries. NDB became operational on 27 February 2016 and its headquarters is situated in Shanghai, China. It is decided that 19.42% of shareholding will be by five members. Currently, 1.83% of the shareholding is by Bangladesh and1.08% by UAE respectively. All the members of the United Nations can approach New Development Bank (NDB) for financial aid. As of the first quarter of the financial year 2022, USD 29.3 billion has been approved for investment in seventy-eight projects. However, recent years' experience of Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Ghana knocking International Monetary Fund (IMF) door for bailing out their economies reflected the Global South's dependence on IMF is intact. It will be a long journey for the BRICS's NDB to win the confidence of countries across the world. Along with NDB, BRICS has established Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) in 2015. It is a framework that provides liquidity support in the short-term balance of payments. This body is aspiring to play as an alternative to the IMF in helping countries of the Global South. The contributions to the CRA are as follows: China ($41 billion), India ($18 billion), Brazil ($18 billion), Russia ($18 billion) and South Africa ($5 billion). By looking into the contributions, it is clear that China is leading the camp. It shows the seriousness of China to provide leadership in BRICS due to its better economic performance in recent decades. It is heartening to see that China is taking BRICS as a serious platform for financial investment despite its larger ulterior aim of global dominance. The Report by Observer Research Foundation (2021) reaffirms the lens provided by Neo-liberal institutionalism that in the absence of a singular superpower dominating all spheres of global politics, the role of institutions like BRICS is crucial in preserving multilateralism. This report has observed that the global institutions of the twentieth century established for multilateralism have failed or are facing a crisis. The relatively successful catch-up by emerging countries like BRICS members has fastened the process of challenging the hegemony of the West in multilateral institutions. Therefore, we witnessed that be it in the United Nations or IMF or WTO, the global North is unable to weave a unilateral narrative of dominance about trade, technology, climate change, finance, development and public health.

The image of the global North as infallible has taken a beating due to the Euro debt crisis of the 2000s, Brexit, the retreat to protectionism and the rise of inward orientation, bilateral trade wars, sanctions and unilateral actions hampering/ violating the sovereignty of the other countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. There has been a greater recognition that the world has changed and it is irreversible. To tackle new challenges, new institutions like BRICS are significant. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only exposed the faultlines existing within the domestic borders of a country but also the cracks between different countries. There were delays and indecisions within many global institutions, including BRICS, inflicting huge material and human costs. However, the failures of WTO and the World Health Organisation (WHO) to tackle the pandemic exposed already existing unfair practices of these institutions. The ignoring of unabated distortionary subsidies by larger trading powers and rich countries, non-tariff barriers, plurilateral preferences beyond most-favoured-nation treatment, the lack of transparency, dumping, freezing of dispute settlement architecture, and the steady erosion of special and differential treatment have meant that WTO exists only for the global North. It made BRICS realise its larger responsibilities in the post-COVID-19 world. The failure of the WHO to address continued challenges faced by poor and developing countries in access to medicines, treatments and vaccines during the pandemic is a stark reminder of the existent inequalities. This has made BRICS realise its role in addressing such a crisis in future with an approach of 'recipient capacity building' and 'sharing'. This must be a development model from below. The institutional architecture of BRICS leaves much to be desired. The world requires greater ethics-driven approaches to face the unfolding technological disruptions and threats to peace and security. The BRICS can become a forerunner of a new development compact to avoid forsaking the 'development tracks' of prevailing multilateral frameworks and inspire new efforts in future.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Unlike the conventional realist school which counts anarchy as a given, fixed and final feature of inter-state politics, the constructivist school highlights the constructedness of anarchy and is therefore changeable. Alexander Wendt (1992) theorises the constructivist perspective by citing the fact that 'Anarchy is what states make of it.' The constructivists emphasise the fact that active players in global politics are not limited to states but institutions and individuals. The vantage points held by citizens (public) and their leaders can change state choices. In this scenario, truth is made and not found. Reality is a social construction that is created by people's beliefs and behaviour. For Wendt, the structures of human relations are shaped by sheer ideas. Therefore, when ideas change, the identities of states and institutions

change and it leads to changes in international relations. This shifting perspective can make or break international institutions and collaborations. In these endeavours collective meanings are important. These interactions and collective endeavours change the meaning of anarchy in international relations from time to time. Then we could see through the constructivist prism that sometimes anarchy appears as a Hobbesian state of war of all against all, sometimes it appears as cooperative and other times as a combination of conflict and cooperation.

David Monyae and Bhaso Ndzendze (2021) trace the fact that the origin of BRICS could be located in the changing ideas in global politics. The time of the idea that the West is fallible and can be corrected had come. The Euro-debt crisis opened that channel of change. Therefore, we could see the relevance of the constructivist approach that ideas change and that change collaborations and institutions. Even the leaders at the helm in Brazil (Lula da Silva), India (Manmohan Singh), China (Hu Jintao) and Russia (Putin) believed in the idea that emerging economies can act together to increase their bargaining power with the West. Then over the years, we can see that with the change in leadership in Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), China (Xi Jinping) and India (Narendra Modi), the perspective towards BRICS changed. Jair Bolsonaro used the platform of BRICS to call for reforms in the United Nations Security Council, IMF and WTO. Bolsonaro was not highlighting the need for more economic cooperation between BRICS members. Similarly, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has adopted a more aggressive and expansionist policy, both in economic and political terms. The earlier warmth between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping evaporated due to the border disputes between the two countries. This has also negatively affected the potential of BRICS. Similarly, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, in recent times, has faced public opposition against the neo-imperialist behaviour of China and India towards African nations. South Africa is careful that the BRICS platform is not used for further exploitation of the natural resources of African countries. As Peter Lowe has discussed that there are different points of convergence and divergence between the interests of BRICS members and ultimately it is the idea of the time that determines the relevance of BRICS for its members.

Leslie Elliott Armijo (2007) raises the question of whether the BRICS is a mirage or an insight. BRICS as a group has reflected commonalities on the ground of having a federal state structure, all five countries are long recognized as political entities, they have modern industrial sectors linked to the global capitalist economy and there is a large informal sector in the economy. These commonalities have created common concerns at both national and global levels. Thus, the origin of BRICS can be seen as a product of circumstances. However, with the more centralising leadership in BRICS countries and internal assertions for self-determination, the vision of BRICS countries has changed over the years. The BRICS

has the central idea of connecting continents across the globe. So far, due to the calculated moves of the leaders and unforeseen circumstances like COVID-19, this central idea has not been fully utilised. Therefore, we could see that the interaction and socialisation between BRICS members are dynamic in nature. Moreover, Russia, China and India, because of their geographical proximity and civilisational connections are having more intense interactions that are creating causes friendship and friction equally. Within BRICS, Brazil and South Africa are still on the periphery. How all five countries will interact and create collective meanings will decide the future of BRICS in near future.

POST/DECOLONIAL THEORY

The post/decolonial school of thought in international relations are perceiving things differently. This school is raising ontological and epistemological questions in the field of international relations. They are questioning the binary oppositions of this academic world into West/Non-West, North/South, Self/Other and friend/foe. This exercise is going deeper into local narratives and then spreads across boundaries of nation-states to see the continuum rather than divisions and oppositions. The post/decolonial school questions the projection of states as fixed and bounded entities. It calls for understanding reality from different vantage points with the mission of connecting different narratives rather than dividing them. It seeks to see the relationality and how it transcends the specificities of local reality. This school has engaged with relational traditions and their conception of space, time, self-other relations, selfhood, praxis and political and social order. Navnita Chadha Behera, Tamara Trownsell and Giorgio Shani call this process as 'Pluriversal Relationality'. In this endeavour silenced pasts will be uncovered, unsettling hierarchies will be questioned and who is seen as knowledge bearers and creators will be unpacked. The central concern here is how and who is defining the contours of the discipline of international relations.

The works of Anibal Quijano (2000) and Walter D. Mignolo (2018) question the basic assumption of the conventional international relations theories that theories of knowledge are universal. These decolonial scholars want to create a more inclusive and democratic narrative about global politics without creating new hierarchies and gatekeepers. It is not about displacing the older hegemons with new ones but about abolishing hierarchies and inequalities in understanding human society. It is not about outright rejection of Western knowledge but displacing it from being the central and sole reference point. In sum, we can say that the post/decolonial school of international relations is not only identifying what is wrong in the existing theories and practices in the field of international relations but also thinking about how to make amends.

From a post/decolonial lens, BRICS is a platform that can decolonise the theory and practice of international relations. This is evident in the way voting share in IMF and WB was changed, although marginally, under the BRICS pressure. India has a 2.63 per cent vote share in the IMF, China has a 6.01 per cent vote share, Russia has a 2.56 per cent vote share and Brazil has 2.22 per cent; the United States is leading with 16.47 per cent. World Bank vote shares also reflect a minor change from the past with India now having 2.91 per cent, China 4.42 per cent and the United States 15.85 per cent. The hegemony of the USA in Bretton Woods Institutions is not ended through these changes but things are not the same also. However, things are not perfectly fine. In the context of the resignation of tainted IMF head Dominique Strauss-Kahn (from France) in 2011, BRICS collectively put up strong resistance to having a non-European head. Still, Christine Lagarde (again from France) was made the head. Even after the completion of the term by Christine Lagarde in 2019, Kristalina Georgieva (from Bulgaria) was made the IMF head. This reflects the resistance to bringing any inclusive changes and BRICS as a group has a long struggle ahead. For this task, BRICS members have to constantly work on improving intra-solidarity. This seems a tough task given the recent escalation of tension between India and China over border markings (Kumar 2012).

The decolonising project of BRICS is not limited to changing the voting share in global institutions or the leader but to changing the perception itself towards who matters and why they matter in international relations. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the fact that intellectual property rights (IPRs) over medicines and vaccines cannot be sole with developed countries. It is not only about research, development and production but also about the distribution of life-saving drugs to the whole of humanity. Similarly, in the discourse around climate change, the BRICS members have played a crucial role in bringing conceptual as well as cognitional changes by bringing in ‘common and yet differential responsibility’ to ‘phaseout of usage of conventional fuels to phasedown of such fuels’. These small but significant contributions of the BRICS cannot be unacknowledged.

CONCLUSION

Through the diverse theories discussed above, we have tried to show that BRICS is a multi-layered and complex entity. Its true potential is not yet realised. As scholars from the global south, we have tried to bring in perspectives about BRICS from various theories. This exercise made us realise that the post/decolonial school of thought is the youngest but better lens to measure the role of the BRICS. Along with post/decolonial schools, the contributions of constructivist schools are important to understand the role of ideas and institutions to navigate global politics.

To remain relevant BRICS has to realise the following things

- BRICS members have to recognise and acknowledge their comparative advantage in respective spheres like trade, energy security, information technology and biotechnology.
- Connectivity is one of the major pillars of engagement between the members as physical connectivity, human connectivity and digital connectivity can be the newer areas of cooperation.
- The contemporary dominance of Western companies in knowledge accumulation highlights the need to build cooperation on data protection and regulation.
- Green investment and green infrastructure building are the need of the hour, and the BRICS has to take a lead in the democratisation of these facilities to all countries.
- The timing is apt for renegotiating the trade deal and trusting each other not only to promote rules-based multilateral order but also to achieve other strategic ambitions, which for decades have only been strong in rhetoric and weaker in implementation.

We can conclude the paper by quoting Henry Ford to reflect the reality of BRICS 'Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is a success.'

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