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BRICS: A step towards a multipolar world?

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Abstract

A multipolar world has been a dream for most of the big players of international relations, Russia especially has been an advocate for a multipolar world since the rise of American hegemony. The list of advocates for a multipolar world has been increasing ever since the rise of regional powers, consisting of the other BRICS members besides Russia. BRICS was formed as an attempt to promote the idea of a multipolar world by balancing the traditional western influence, by establishing a platform for the major regional powers to communicate and collaborate. This paper aims at examining the extent to which BRICS has achieved its purpose, by analysing the course of history, and the development of BRICS as an intergovernmental organisation since its formation. The research is mainly conducted using primary and secondary data, and the analysis of the literature written by international relations experts.

Keywords: Regional powers, developing countries, influence, cooperation, development

Introduction

Establishment of BRICS: Purpose and Origin

Interestingly the term BRIC, which was to take up such significance in the world of international relations, was first coined by an economic researcher working at Goldman Sachs, Jim O'Neill, to create a category for the large, fast-growing developing countries in purely economic and financial terms, in 2001 when the world was defined as an unipolar one being led by the United States in every sphere.

However, if we trace back the idea of multi-polarity, we will reach a struggling leadership of Russia in the late 1990s under its then Prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov. He propounded the idea of RIC (Russia, India, China), which had also made some progress by holding foreign minister level annual trilateral meetings since 2001 to discuss certain non-traditional security issues like migration, trafficking, terrorism, etc. Since 2006 the Brazilian foreign minister was also invited to join the RICs foreign ministers meetings, this invitation and the idea of including Brazil was that of the Russian Foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, however these meetings were largely informal in nature in 2006 & 2007. The year 2008, witnessed the first formal meeting amongst the BRICs foreign ministers in Yekaterinburg, Russia, which was again a Russian initiative.

The 2008 financial crisis proved to be a turning point in proving the legitimacy of the developing countries and their contest for power, as the developed countries were facing profound financial crises while the developing countries had relative economic stability. Within two months of the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy when the BRIC countries' finance ministers and central bankers met in Brazil, then within the following four months they met four times which acted as a base for these countries to become the agenda setters in the April 2009 G20 summit. In late November, the BRICs countries' first ever summit was announced to be held in Russia in 2009. This way the financial crisis of 2008 laid the basis for the development of the political dimension of BRICs.

The agenda of the first BRICs summit included discussions and considerations about the reforms in international institutions, especially the financial institutions namely the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) which were and still are considered the puppets in the hands of the west. Another key theme was about reducing the global dependence on the US Dollar by reducing US dollar assets in their existing reserve, the Russian government was also eager to discuss ways to limit the use of US Dollars in intra-BRICs trades.

However, the main objectives of the summit revolved around development issues and plans, ranging from science and education to natural disasters.

Development of BRICS as an intergovernmental organisation

The results of the BRICS first summit and the role these countries played during the 2008 financial crisis and the following G20, were visible in the form of IMF quota reforms of 2010 which said to include the BRIC economies in the, which are considered as emerging markets and growing economies, in the 10 largest members of the IMF for the first time.

By 2010, the BRICS was already receiving formal and informal membership requests from several countries such as Mexico, Indonesia, and Turkey. Right before the second BRICS summit in Brazil, the IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) summit was also held in Brazil which allowed South African President, Jacob Zuma, an opportunity to hold bilateral meetings with all the BRICS leaders individually, which proved fruitful and ultimately turned the BRIC into BRICS. This development altered the complete character of this intergovernmental grouping by making it a secure global alliance representing all the major regional powers of the developing continents. The inclusion of an African country symbolised the inclusive nature of BRICS as an organisation.

The third BRICS summit in Sanya, China (2011) symbolised their rising interest and will to comment and showcase their dissatisfaction about the manner in which the intervention in Libya was carried out. Another thing that influenced this rise of interest was the presence of all the BRICS countries in the UN Security Council at that time. This summit concluded with production of an action plan as a sign that BRICS now sought to be more than a consulting group and head towards strengthening cooperation and working together in various spheres like education, international security, finance, agriculture, etc.

The fourth BRICS summit in New Delhi, India (2012) marked the beginning of the institutionalisation phase of the BRICS by putting forth the idea for a BRICS development bank (BDB), as there was disappointed with the pace of reforms in the global financial institutions, and the interaction amongst BRICS had broadened from merely intergovernmental to interaction amongst the working groups, think tanks, business people, and other. This summit even went to the extent of warning the collective west and Israel against military action over Iran's controversial nuclear program, and even criticised the developments taking place in Syria.

By the time of the fifth BRICS summit in Durban, South Africa (2013) the significance of BRICS was established to an extent where the Syrian President was asking them to mediate in the conflict in his nation, however another explanation for this can be seen as the close Russian ties with Assad's government and China's interest in the middle east region which might have prompted Assad to seek BRICS allegiance. This summit also attempted to include the African countries in one of its forums, "BRICS Leaders-Africa Dialogue Forum"; this can be seen as an active attempt to establish the significance of BRICS in the African continent.

It was during the sixth BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil (2014) that the western media took great interest as the idea

of BDB was being materialised in the form of the New Development Bank (NDB), and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) was also being established. The institutionalisation of BRICS can be seen as a major step of walking away from the western influence and west influenced financial institutions.

The western attempts to isolate Russia after the annexation of Crimea, gave a new geopolitical purpose to BRICS as its members decided to take a firm stand against any such action, for instance when Australia threatened to exclude Russia from G20, BRICS issued a collective statement in favour of Russia and the concept of multipolarity.

The seventh BRICS summit in Ufa, Russia (2015) saw a change in the national situations of the BRICS members, while Russia, Brazil, and South Africa were undergoing political unrest, India under its newly elected Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and China were continuing to flourish. BRICS 'stand on the annexation of Crimea invoked accusations from the rest of the world about being biased and being selective about breaking the rules. This summit marked the inauguration of NDB and CRA. Also, although after a delay and wait of five years the IMF reforms which were approved in 2010 were finally implemented in 2016, showcasing the relevance of BRICS in influencing the international organisations.

The next BRICS summit in Goa, India (2016) witnessed a contrast in the economic situations of the BRICS member countries, where on one hand India was reaching for becoming one of the fastest growing economies, Brazil on the other hand was facing severe economic and diplomatic problems. But, despite this contrast the goals aligned and the summit proved to be a success.

The prelude to the ninth BRICS summit in Xiamen, China (2017) was quite disturbing as a border standoff occurred between India and China when China began building a road in a disputed area. However, the legitimacy of BRICS was again proved as India & China agreed to pull back their troops and the tension defused right before the summit. Another major focus of this summit was the focus on strengthening people to people exchanges. The list of terrorist groups over which the BRICS expressed their concern included Pakistan's Lashkar-e-taiba, which was seen as a win for India's diplomacy against Pakistan.

The tenth and the eleventh BRICS summit were hosted under the newly elected presidents of the nations, Johannesburg, South Africa (2018) and Brasilia, Brazil (2019), showcased that the change in leadership did not affect the inclination of the member countries towards BRICS, and not just this but the leaders also saw this as a platform to address the international community. The tenth summit saw an increased cooperation in the sphere of emerging technologies by establishing the "BRICS networks of Science parks, technology business incubators and small and medium sized enterprises", besides this the summit also saw an expansion in NDB's operations by announcing the establishment of the Project preparation fund, and a regional office in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The twelfth BRICS summit was supposed to be held in St. Petersburg, Russia (2020) but due to the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic it took place in the format of a video conference, this clearly indicated the willingness of the leaders to maintain momentum and continuity. The declaration focused on marking the 75th anniversary of the UN, reinforcing their trust in multilateral institutions, and

calling for global peace in the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic. Two innovative institutional establishments happened during this summit, first, the BRICS rapid information security channel (BRISC) which would allow the central bank of the member countries to tackle cybersecurity, second, the BRICS local currency bond fund. The thirteenth BRICS summit hosted by India (2021) was again hosted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was the main highlight of the summit.

During the fourteenth BRICS summit hosted by China virtually (2022) two important regional players applied for membership in BRICS, namely Iran and Argentina, thus clearly depicting the increasing value of BRICS in international relations. A key issue of BRICS concern was the Ukrainian crisis, the member states encouraged diplomacy and communication however China, India, and South Africa had chosen to not participate in the voting held in the United Nations denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The other key highlight was the continuing discussions on post pandemic economic recovery.

The most recent BRICS summit hosted by South Africa (2023) saw an expansion as 40 countries expressed their interest and 23 formally applied for membership, out of which six of them- Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE were invited to become full members of BRICS on 1 January 2024.

Also, the Russian President's decision to attend the summit virtually marked the maturity level of the member states and their understanding as the Russian President's presence would have diverted the attention of the summit in a different direction, but at the same time his virtual presence did not affect the relations amongst the members.

Future of BRICS

The interests, values and the ambitions of the BRICS countries do not always align, and in some cases even lie in the opposite direction. From an economic perspective, Russia as a major oil exporter will benefit from high energy prices whereas India as a major oil importer will suffer due to this. Even in political terms, Brazil, India, and South Africa are ardent followers of democracy, meanwhile Russia has a Presidential democracy combined with the practices of Oligarchy, and China has a communist regime in place which is rather authoritative in comparison to the governments of other BRICS countries. On one hand Brazil and India are aiming for a power distribution in the international organisations, while Russia and China are not really that enthusiastic about it since they are permanent members of the Security Council and their privileged positions in the international organisations has benefitted them well over the years. China rather emphatically opposes Brazil and India's campaign to gain permanent UNSC membership. There is also a concern amongst the member states about the intra BRICS trade imbalances which was also raised during the tenth BRICS summit in Johannesburg. Some of the BRICS victories in their fight for multipolarity have remained incomplete, like the unanswered demand for democratising the IMF.

One characteristic about BRICS and leaders which ensures close ties, cooperation, and a continued threat to the west by strengthening the idea of multipolarity is that the BRICS leaders and ministers continue to meet each other on the sidelines of other international events to discuss contemporary issues. For instance, BRICS leaders met in

Hangzhou in China on the margins of the G20.

The bilateral relations of the BRICS countries can also be seen as a hindrance in the alignment of their decisions. The most significant is the India-China relationship, both the countries have issues with each other ranging from border conflicts in the Ladakh region and the state of Arunachal Pradesh of India, to maritime conflicts in the Indian Ocean region, from trade related issues to issues of cybersecurity, the list seems to extend and overlap itself in various spheres. However, despite the various issues with and within the BRICS, the BRICS countries have managed to take firm decisions, strengthen cooperation, make and fulfil promises, and further the objectives of BRICS as an organisation. BRICS has stood still despite the instability in Russia caused by the Ukrainian crisis in fact, except Brazil, all the other BRICS countries abstained from voting in the UN general assembly. BRICS has also allowed Russia to showcase that it is not isolated despite the attempts from the west to do so. Even the change in the national leaders and their beliefs did not shake the role and importance of BRICS, be it the power shift in Brazil from leftist leadership to rightist and then back to leftist, or the change of leadership in India. So, the future of BRICS looks bright enough to ensure its growth in the international relations despite all its problems and shortcomings.

Conclusion

The fact the western hegemony and influence is being questioned, makes it safe enough to state that the global world order is atleast undergoing a transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. But to assess to what extent BRICS has played a role in bringing about this transition is the purpose of this paper.

The actions taken collectively by BRICS have ensured that the west no longer holds the sole authority to taken actions regarding the global issues, that the international organisations function in a more democratic manner, that the voices of the global south is heard, that the problems faced by the global south are being looked after and discussed, that the global threats like diseases, cybersecurity, terrorism etc. are being discussed on all the levels.

It can be said that the rise of regional powers in terms of economics and influence led to the rising importance of BRICS on the global stage and its effective working as well, and the rise of BRICS led to the rise of these regional powers in terms of diplomacy. However, BRICS is a mere platform for pushing forward the idea of multipolarity, and in that sense it has certainly being developing its influence.

To conclude about the extent to which BRICS has succeeded in establishing multipolarity in the global world order, it can be said that it has certainly shaken the western hegemony and establishing the beginning of an era of multipolarity.

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