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BRICS, soft power and climate change: new challenges in global governance?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at describing if, in a context of global gridlock and emerging issues such as climate change, a decisive role could be played by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Despite these countries experiencing internal and structural problems, they could represent an innovative answer to the functioning of the current global framework. In fact, even though they are not considered to be as accountable as western countries in many areas, their leading commitment to global issues such as climate change could provide an important solution to strengthening their weak 'soft power'. By working together to instigate global change, and taking advantage of Western 'decline', can the BRICS play a decisive role in shaping global governance?

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Introduction

In this article, we consider if the BRICS, as a leading group among the 'emerging powers', will represent a real challenge to the global order so far dominated by the centrality of the West. At the moment, it seems that the Western world is undergoing a crisis due to several issues that are undermining its central position. At the same time, the BRICS are experiencing a growth in their importance in the international arena. Is their growing importance threatening the current international system? In our opinion, this challenge should not be considered as a threat, but rather as a moment of transition in the construction of a multipolar system that can offer better answers to the current chaotic world order and contribute to shaping global governance (GG). The BRICS, if opportunely and rationally inserted into a multipolar context, could contribute to improving international relations, as well as taking on a more central role if they establish themselves as a subject capable of leading change, beginning with those issues described as 'problems without passports' (Annan 2009) as is the case with climate change.

To explain how this process could happen, we have to take into account many different issues, in the first place, the limits of GG itself. Despite its theoretical 'good intentions', in practice, GG has not found a real application as a means of enlarging participation in a changing world. Despite positive claims on how governance should lead to more open participation, it in fact has been criticized as a means of sustaining

Western-centric moods at an international level (Hermet 2008). Secondly, we have to consider the importance of ‘soft power’. At the moment, soft power is led by Western countries that still represent the ‘centre’ under a ‘charm power’ point of view (Stuenkel 2016). We believe that soft power and the ability to lead in solving global issues such as climate change are closely connected. We also state that climate change will provide a bench test for the BRICS and their intentions both in terms of the material and physical future of the world and their ability to act as real and credible models for other countries: if the BRICS were able to give a real impetus on climate change governance reform by acting in unison and arriving at real outcomes, beyond the all too common rhetorical discourse, they would probably achieve a more accountable soft power and a more definite power in shaping GG itself. This point of view arises from the evidence that Western countries are undergoing a period of decline, at least in terms of cohesion, and whom previously had the opportunity to take a lead in global processes. At the same time the growth of the BRICS, their presence in the Global South and the ability to build institutions that could potentially work differently, and as alternatives to those which arose from Bretton Woods, are other key factors. As such, all of these areas are closely connected. Therefore, this paper will also consider the importance of BRICS financial institutions and their presence in Global South.

We will also consider some of the BRICS current ‘limitations’: the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, the BRICS continuing ‘strong’ dependence on coal, their rivalry (Basile and Cecchi 2018) and their attitude of acting only for individual interests (Lo 2016). Finally, we will try to provide an answer to some questions such as: if they can cope with their internal limitations, will they be able to shape the future world order thereby replacing the West? Or will they eventually just give rise to a world order that is actually emerging: a multipolar one?

Looking to the future, and taking into consideration their continuing and significant dependence on energy sources such as coal, it would seem that these premises are rather utopian. However, it is our idea that if the BRICS are able to stand out as real and credible models of soft power, they will be able to fill an important gap and also become the true bearers of a new global order and a different model of GG.

The influence of the BRICS in the international framework: a global shift?

The current international order is going through a moment of deep uncertainty which threatens its stability. Starting from what can be considered to be the watershed moment that is the 11 September 2001 (more so than the previous implosion of the Soviet Union), the world is going through some disturbing changes.

It is difficult, of course, to explore the specifics of all those problems affecting our times, but what remains clear is how they are all interconnected. To give some examples, economic decisions do not only concern one state but have repercussions on other states. Climate change is a global problem, as well as other issues such as energy resources, migration, nuclear weapons and so on. All of these have both a general reach and are of great interest to our common well-being. At the same time, although these are problems of a significant scale, we are very far from finding answers to them. We are stuck in what some authors have called *gridlock* (Hale, Held,

and Young 2013), a state in which means we are a long way from improving international relations and sometimes seeming to complicate them even further.

In this context, therefore, emerging powers are gaining an increasingly decisive weight on the global stage. Specifically, when we talk about ‘emerging powers’, we often refer to those countries whose economic development is not only leading to internal divergences but also leading to how different countries deal with one another, as is the case of the BRICS.

In general, the presence of the BRICS on the international stage has consequences that we could summarize as institutional and geopolitical. With regard to the so-called ‘institutional’ sphere, we must first remember to what degree their efforts to build parallel organizations have also been motivated by their intolerance towards the dominance, at the level of international institutions, by Western countries (Weisbrodt and Johnston 2009, 2016), the US and Western EU *in primis*. In this sense, given the intolerance with respect to the operation of the traditional Bretton Woods institutions, Michael Zürn (2018) speaks of ‘counter institutionalization’, to precisely describe the reaction to an unbalanced, and western-centric functioning of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). These institutions have for decades done both ‘good and bad’ by putting into practice mechanisms of economic rehabilitation that have ended up drawing the scorn of many developing countries. Behind their decisions, the weight of the West has been very influential, due to the unbalanced voting system (Kaya 2018) and to the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’: i.e. the way in which loans were given by these institutions to countries in crisis, where the weight of influence of the US in decision-making has been disproportionate (Babb 2013).

In this situation, countries with poor economic potential, and who were forced to resort to the aid of these organizations, could not cope. In many cases, they had to give in to pressure and ask for loans that these organizations granted in exchange for high interest rates. This created an ever closer and more suffocating dependence on these institutions (Stiglitz 2002).

However, the BRICS have started fighting back against this state of affairs. These countries, thanks to their economic growth, have been able to reduce interference by these institutions. This has given rise to a sort of ‘protest’ against the *modus operandi* of the West, creating parallel institutions and generating the phenomenon of counter-institutionalization mentioned above. Their declared task was specifically to act as a counterweight to the current GG through the reform of financial institutions (‘to advance the reform of the international financial institutions, so as to reflect changes in the global economy’).¹ At the same time, they have become spokespersons for the needs of countries that do not have a voice in the Bretton Woods Institutions, namely the Global South (‘the emerging and developing economies must have greater voice and representation in international financial institutions, whose heads and executives should be transparent, and merit-based selection process’).² Thus, when the CRA (Contingent Reserve Arrangement), the NDB (New Development Bank) and the China-led AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) were founded within a short space of time, it immediately became clear that the basic functioning of these new institutions would be different from that of the IMF and the WB (Liao 2015). Just to take the example of the NDB,

¹Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries Leaders, from the First meeting in Yekaterinburg on 16 June 2009.

²Ibidem.

here the five founding members (the BRICS countries) participate with equal economic capital which allows them to have an equal and not 'asymmetric' voting capacity as is the case with the IMF.

While it is true that these countries have not renounced their participation in 'traditional' international institutions, but rather giving life to these new institutions, the question remains, will they be able to challenge the Washington Consensus (Bagchi 2012)? There are also other important differences to consider, such as the principle of non-interference: unlike the IMF and the WB, the AIIB and the NDB are not 'interested' in how projects are put into practice in each country, but only grant funds based on the validity of a project (Abdenur and Folly 2015; Peng and Tok 2016).

All the same, it seems that the BRICS financial institutions are more of an attempt to escape some form of domination by Western institutions, especially from the point of view of the restrictions and impediments that are created for them (Parizek and Matthew 2017), rather than to act as a threat to Western-centric financial governance. In any case, the creation of parallel institutions inaugurates a new path in GG. The Bretton Woods Institutions seem to have become obsolete at this stage, and the BRICS counter-institutionalization has come to represent a different way of doing business to the traditional *modus operandi* of the West.

At the same time, the importance of the BRICS has also been growing in the Global South. In this regard, the question is if they are really willing to represent the Global South, or are they trying to develop new forms of colonization or sub-imperialism (Deepak 2016). There is no doubt that their presence has been growing in this area, such as in Africa, and in other countries such as Venezuela. However, are they willing to be spokespersons for the 'periphery' (Wallerstein 1974)?

Their ability to reshape GG will greatly depend on these issues too: their accountability towards the Global South and the way they manage these institutions. In this sense, both aspects are closely connected with the ability to build a more accountable image of themselves. The BRICS still lack a truly accountable soft power, but there are also signs that indicate their commitment in improving this.

BRICS and soft power

In recent years, the BRICS have started a massive campaign, both individually and as a group, to improve their image and strengthen their soft power (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016; Stuenkel 2016). This is an important aspect of their growing power because they presumably feel there is a gap to be filled in terms of their 'charm power'. Soft power, according to Joseph Nye (2004), can be explained as the ability to influence others to get the outcomes one wants without the use of coercion. In other words, soft power involves leading by example, without recurring to economic constraints and/or use of an army.

The BRICS countries, mainly due to the crises that have hit them in recent years, are struggling to find a credible role in this area. From this point of view, Western countries still offer models that are more attractive than that of the BRICS. In the soft power field, the BRICS 'face their most serious shortcomings relative to the West when it comes to serving as role models' (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016). However, there are multiple

examples of how they are trying to start campaigns to promote their cultural influence on the rest of the world:

In 2009, China launched a project with a \$6.58 billion budget called *waixuan gongzuo*, which can be translated as ‘overseas propaganda.’ Hillary Clinton, citing the growing presence of state-backed outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and CCTV, argued during a Congressional committee meeting that ‘We are engaged in an information war, and we are losing that war.’ In addition to RT, Russia reorganized the RIA Novosti news agency and laid off a significant part of its staff, including its relatively independent management. The agency’s new leader then announced the launch of Sputnik, a government-funded network of news hubs in more than thirty countries with 1,000 staff members producing radio, social media, and news-wire content in local languages . (Stuenkel 2016)

The examples go on: such as Brazil’s interest in becoming leaders in peace and security, South African commitment to human rights, and India’s bolstering of its image in the media, just to name a few (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016). Therefore, although there is a long way to go, the BRICS are trying to fill this gap in soft power.

What effects will this process have? Will these countries be able to shape the global imaginary with their growth and power in the field of soft power? Will they be able to create credible innovations? In our opinion, there is an important area in which they could aspire to become stronger models of soft power: the promotion of a GG that really wants to deal with issues such as climate change.

West vs BRICS: what is the commitment to climate change?

Western countries are experiencing a moment of discord in terms of climate leadership. Despite publicly claiming the importance of taking action to solve global problems, in practice, they seem to be pursuing policies that deviate from a real will to implement positive changes. The most emblematic case is undoubtedly that of the US, and their attitude towards the Paris agreement, but of course other Western countries are doing little to deal with climate change. Another example is Italy. In 2016, a referendum on the abolition of drills did not reach quorum, and the state decided that instead of encouraging the population to vote, it has encouraged voters not to take part in this referendum, thus voluntarily or involuntarily favouring the interests of large oil multi-nationals (Balmer 2016). The examples could go on, ranging from the critics of EU and US (limited) funds for climate change policies (Carrington 2017; Appelt and Dejgaard, 2018; Meade 2018) to the declining role that they are having in being leaders in climate-related issues (Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013).

The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, defined climate change as the most important challenge facing humanity (Sengupta 2018). Other problems of great importance which require an immediate response are being overshadowed at this moment in history by the threat that climate change poses to the Earth. In the light of these considerations, we wonder: beyond individual interests, if the BRICS were to become credible leaders in managing problems without passports such as climate change, could they also become leaders in soft power? Under this scenario where Western countries are experiencing increasing fragmentation, favourable prospects could open up for the BRICS.

On the other hand, another important factor to take into account is the dependence on coal for industrial production in the BRICS countries (Basso, and Viola 2016). However,

despite their dependence on energy sources that lead to a high rate of pollution, these countries have started to invest heavily in sustainable resources (Baker 2019). This is a good sign, indeed among the first loans provided by the NDB in 2016, there were huge sums destined to the development of alternative energy sources (Mattos and Rosa 2016). In our opinion, it is in this context that the BRICS can increase their credibility by reconfiguring themselves as accountable leaders. In fact, in the field of renewable energy, they need to work in unison to create a more credible partnership (Debidatta 2015). This partnership can really make a decisive contribution to GG, encouraging the process by which countries reverse the course that they have taken in terms of climate change policies and therefore, increasing soft power of the BRICS. However, there are limits.

If we take a look at the Climate Action Tracker (2019) web page, we can see how poor the results have been for the BRICS countries both in terms reducing their emissions and also in making a decisive switch towards alternative energies in order to accomplish their COP21 objectives. In the case of Russia, it still has not ratified the Paris Agreement, and its contribution to reducing emissions is considered 'critically insufficient'. This means that there is still a lot to do, but there are important signs that the BRICS countries could find ways of increasing cooperation amongst each other and will try to switch leadership to their institutions in dealing with climate change governance. Furthermore, the BRICS could strengthen cooperation in some areas related to climate change: energy efficiency, agriculture and development finance (Downie, and Williams 2018).

Another limitation is the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil. In fact, Bolsonaro not only declared his intention to withdraw from the COP 21 (Agencia Brazil 2018) but also stated his interest in building a closer relationship with the US (Spetalnick 2018) and prevent China from gaining more power in Brazil's economic management (Casarões 2018) thus favouring a division among the BRICS. In any case, these declarations seem far from being realistic. In fact, Bolsonaro has already begun to retract, after being elected, some of his previous statements (The BRICS post, 2018). Furthermore, Brazil is strongly dependent on its relationship with China since it is the country's primary commercial partner (Casarões 2018). Moreover, the BRICS group is the only forum to which Brazil belongs where two partners also reside as permanent members on the UN security council. Additionally, Brazil has the privilege of participating in the NDB whose voting system is equal for all unlike that of the Bretton Woods institutions. As a result, despite the populist drift and the potential fragmentation of the group, there are sufficient reasons to believe that Brazil's decision to move away from the BRICS may be counterproductive for Brazil itself.

Western fragmentation: an opportunity for the BRICS?

Certain events have caused many Western countries to fall short of their historical leading role, giving the chance to the BRICS to open up a different path in the international framework. In the case of the US, in addition to their exit from climate agreements, they have also taken a path that is becoming more and more isolated not only with respect to these emerging countries (for example, the attempt to create a free trade area with certain Asian countries, close to China, namely the Trans-Pacific Partnership) but also with respect to its

'historical' allies, namely the EU countries. In fact, with regard to the latter, the US has undertaken initiatives that have provoked manifold reactions and malcontents. An example of this is the position taken by the US towards the agreement of Vienna (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA)³ in 2015 with Iran. This agreement, which had fostered a positive reaction and Iranian adherence, was aimed at curbing the country's nuclear energy production. The initial joy of victory as a result of the agreement, however, was followed by the decision by the US to leave the agreement. This provoked a diplomatic reaction and protest from the EU concerned about the potential consequences that this decision might have in the region, as well as about safeguarding its image and its global power which appeared to be weakened (Grunstein 2018). Therefore, there are signs that Western countries are undergoing a moment of fragmentation not only with respect to these emerging countries but also amongst themselves (Carrel and Nienaber 2018; Batabyal 2018; Mansfield 2018).

In fact, beginning with the adhesion of several EU countries to the AIIB, which was criticized by the US (Perlez 2015), as well as climate change policies, ever wider divisions are opening up between the EU and the US. And this fragmentation will also probably have important consequences on their 'charm power' capabilities. In short, on a global level, the impression is that the West is leaving a 'power vacuum' in terms of leadership, with the US trying to act in a unipolar way which may lead to more instability.

The theory of neorealism in international relations asserts (Waltz 1979) that in situations of *balance of power*, the following situation may arise: when one of the states circumvents this equilibrium acting in a solitary manner, in view of an increase in war power, the other states ally against it and, after having resized it, try to re-establish balance. Taking an historical example, this is what happened with Napoleon, when the other European powers allied against him and defeated him at Waterloo, blocking his expansionist aims. In the current world, from the point of view of war, this situation seems unlikely given the asymmetry of military power in favour of the US. Today, a far-reaching military confrontation would have indescribable consequences. However, from a diplomatic, economic and environmental point of view, the balance of power could probably be re-established by pursuing the goal of creating a global opposition to unipolarity.

This situation can be taken advantage by the BRICS countries to try to fill the gap left by the West and try to become the spokesperson of a multipolar order that leads to more suitable and binding negotiations to face these global challenges. In this situation, the vacuum left could also represent a possible opportunity for the BRICS to fill their soft power gap and play a central role in the future of GG (Xinhua 2017). And in this sense, climate change plays a key role.

BRICS and climate change: a real interest or a rhetorical discourse?

During the most recent BRICS summits in Xiamen (2017) and in Johannesburg (2018), the BRICS leaders have reaffirmed, through the Xiamen Declaration and the Johannesburg Declaration, their commitment to take decisive action in dealing with climate change. Under the lemma 'BRICS: Stronger Partnership for a Brighter Future', in Xiamen the leaders committed to enhance BRICS cooperation on climate change and

³http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-ofaction_en.pdf.

expand green financing, to take actions to advance result-oriented cooperation in areas such as prevention of air and water pollution, waste management and biodiversity conservation. These are only a few of the themes of a broader approach to future sustainable development, cooperation and shaping of GG.

In particular:

On climate, the BRICS leaders called for full implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, and urge developed countries to provide financial, technological and capacity-building support to developing countries to enhance their mitigation and adaptation capabilities. (Kosolapova 2017)

Also, during the 10th BRICS summit, there were statements underlining their strong interest on climate change. Here the lemma was: 'BRICS in Africa: Collaboration for Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity in the 4th Industrial Revolution'. There were different declarations on climate change issues, but their most interesting statement for this discussion is the following:

We call upon all countries to fully implement the Paris Agreement adopted under the principles of the UNFCCC including the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, and urge developed countries to provide financial, technological and capacity-building support to developing countries to enhance their capability in mitigation and adaptation. (BRICS 2018)

This part of the Johannesburg Declaration state two important points: their commitment to the Paris Agreement and their interest in favouring sustainable development for developing countries, thus underpinning their role with regard to the Global South. Although their declarations look enthusiastic, we wonder if their commitment to achieving their goals will be real or is it just a rhetorical discourse. In previous meetings, such as Copenhagen and Kyoto (Qi, 2011; Hurrell and Sengupta 2012; Petrone 2017), their role was ambiguous, but as we have seen there are multiple signs of their willingness to address these problems, despite the aforementioned limits. Moreover, they could strengthen their cooperation with the aim of getting a real and definite commitment. All these situations should be directed towards improving their soft power. If the BRICS want to be global players and accountable leaders, they need to become an effective and accountable bloc.

Conclusions

In light of this general analysis of the current global situation, we have seen how the world is characterized by great uncertainties. The reasons we cannot find adequate solutions to global problems are many, and it would be impossible to explain them all here. The attitude that Western countries are showing towards global issues means that they are far from finding solutions, this mainly being due to the fragmentation they are undergoing.

Although climate change will play a decisive role, we have seen how many countries are giving it little priority. This is a fundamental problem, which highlights the issues linked to GG, which is not going through the best of times: the Western mould that has characterized it up until now has been somewhat rejected by those countries which would like to reshape it.

This is the case of the BRICS, who are trying to bring about a change in the global paradigm. Indeed, the BRICS themselves are going through many difficulties, both in terms of internal political issues (Brazil or Russia as examples), and the homogeneity of their intentions. However, for some time now it seems that these countries have been (apparently) trying to strengthen their cooperation, as has emerged from their most recent summits. Above all these countries are trying to occupy a position as leaders in global issues, as stated by the Chinese president (Huang 2017). This being the case, it remains to be seen how they will manage obtaining those results.

In our view, considering the crises that the West is going through, specifically losing its central role (some scholars talk about Post-Western World), we wonder if the BRICS will be able to fill the vacuum of power that is looming. From a 'soft power' point of view, their influence is still not very incisive. In this context, the West is still in the vanguard, even if the attitude that it is taking towards problems without passport, and specifically climate change, shows that their leadership skills are also suffering in this area. In this framework, will the BRICS replace Western countries as leading powers devoted to general problems? Even if their ability to play a leading role is threatened by their dependence on obsolete production models that generate pollution, there are signs of change.

If the BRICS stand out as leaders on these issues, and inspire changes that allow the world to get out of the gridlock, they will also gain more importance in terms of soft power and more credibility internationally. It is a difficult challenge, but the 'decline' of the West could open these paths up to them. This process is under way, either because the BRICS are already starting to expand their economic power, or because they have the need to act as models.

Even if they have already attained a certain level of economic and institutional influence, they lack the political base. And if they choose to act in unison, posing as credible alternatives, then they could also attain high levels of soft power and be able to give a new imprint to future GG.

How will all of this be perceived by the West? It is hoped that the situation does not degenerate into armed conflict, but that Western countries will take note of the multipolarism already in place. In the future, there needs to be a greater awareness regarding the creation of a more livable, safer world and above all a GG that really cares about the needs of the biosphere and of individuals (Falk 1995).

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