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BRICS in the Contemporary World: changing identities, converging interests

FABIANO MIELNICZUK

ABSTRACT This paper aims to address the reasons why the acronym BRICS is moving from being an easy marker to guide foreign investors interested in emerging markets to denoting an important political group of countries determined to promote major changes in international relations. Theoretically the paper draws on social constructivism to demonstrate that the changing identities of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) can be treated as the main cause of the convergence of their interests in the international arena. Through a detailed analysis of these countries’ statements at the opening sessions of the UN General Assembly from 1991 to 2011, their social claims about themselves are retraced and the way they have judged the international sphere in which they engage is captured, in order to demonstrate the changing character of their identities. These new identities, it is argued, created the opportunity for converging interests, which explains the emerging political structure of BRICS. The paper concludes that, after four major summits and a significant number of wide-ranging low-level meetings, BRICS might be considered one of the major long-lasting forces shaping the new architecture of international relations in the 21st century.

BRIC is the acronym created by Goldman Sacks analyst Jim O’Neill in 2001 to indicate those countries that would grow at faster rates and would be safe places for investors in the 21st century. Brazil, Russia, India and China have been promoting their consolidation as a political group since 2006. It became a political reality in 2009, with the first BRIC Summit, in Yekarinburg, Russia. In the following years the group held other three summits: in Brasilia (2010), Sanya (2011) and New Delhi (2012). In 2011 South Africa became a member of the group adding an s to the acronym.

BRICS has gained importance on the international stage as a result of many factors. Some authors emphasise the weight of China’s economy in promoting the group as a whole; other scholars prefer to see BRICS’ emergence against the backdrop of the world international crisis and the relative economic power the bloc has gained at the expense of Europe and the USA; other analysts see it as an initiative of soft balancing to counter the hegemony of the USA. The fact is

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that, with 43% of the world’s population, 18% of global trade and 20% of the world’s GDP, BRICS has become a political reality that deserves to be scrutinised by the academic community.

This paper intends to analyse the aspects that have contributed to the success in putting together the letters of the acronym in a way that has turned it into a political reality. Ironically, as will be clear in the following pages, what put BRICS together is a very strong sentiment against the injustice of global capitalism, which is anathema to the idea portrayed through the acronym’s first usage as a label aimed at directing foreign investment to their economies. As will be argued in this paper, the view that the world order is unfair is just one example of a specific shared view among BRICS that has contributed to their emergence and consolidation. For this reason, the issue of most interest here is the problem of identity: how can a group formed by countries that are so different from each other expect to be a permanent feature of international relations?

In order to present a tentative answer to this question the text is divided into three parts. In the next section the importance of considering the concept of identity in foreign policy analysis will be briefly elaborated, having as a backdrop the theoretical debates that have permeated the discipline of international relations since the 1990s. This section suggests the adoption of a less deterministic approach to the relationship between identity and interests, without nonetheless denying the great influence of the former on the latter. In the following section the manifestations of identity of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are presented through an analysis of their discourses in the opening sessions of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Finally, an attempt is made to sketch the main findings of the previous section and to present some hypothesis that could be explored to explain the emergence of the group.

**Identities and interests**

The theoretical debate on the importance of identities in determining states’ interests emerged strongly in the discipline after the end of the Cold War. In general its proponents faulted those adhering to the traditional approaches to dealing with the interests of states as exogenous to the interaction among units, and to conferring exclusivity to the material variables in explaining its determination. Interests were considered exogenous since they were given by the anarchical structure of the international system and not as a result of the interaction between units; they were thought to be materially determined once the structure of the system was understood only in terms of the distribution of military capabilities among states.¹ These two assumptions supported the interpretation that states interacted within an anarchic environment having, in advance, a set of preferences, the choice of which would depend on the evaluation of the material capacities to perform them, which, in its turn, ensued from a cost-benefit calculation.² Therefore, in a system like the Cold War, marked by strategic parity between the superpowers and a zero-sum game arising from diverging interests, there would be little room for change. However, the Cold War came to an end,
and with it the belief that only the material structure determined the interests of states. After all, how else could one explain that the interests between the two superpowers had come to be convergent if the distribution of capacities remained unchanged?

The constructivists’ answer was to criticise the direct causal link established between the structure of the international system and the interests of states. By deploying the concept of identity they denied the traditional theories’ inference that the uncertainty inherent in the anarchic environment led states to behave selfishly and perpetuate self-help, since states have identities that determine whether the relations among them will be cooperative or conflictive. Regarding the end of the Cold War, the constructivist approaches emphasise that a possible change in the identity of the USSR led to the transformation of its interests and, consequently, to changes in the structure of the international system. This explanation was widely accepted by constructivists, but there was no consensus on the reasons leading to change. Specifically there was no clarity about where the new identity had come from: from within the USSR, as a result of a dispute between rival political groups; from the outside, out of the relationship between the USSR and the USA; or from the interaction between these two different levels.

The details of the constructivist interpretation of the end of the Cold War are not within the scope of this paper. Rather, the paper aims to demonstrate how, from the beginning, the concern with the origin of identities became part of the theoretical debates within this perspective. Wendt offered the prevailing view during the 1990s. For him, identities are given by the structure, understood as a ‘structure of roles’, defined by the processes of interaction (social practices) between the actors. In this sense social identities are constructed during the interaction, and not imposed by an exogenous structure materially defined. Moreover, the emphasis on social practices allows for the existence of as many structures as there might result from these processes. Hence the famous statement: ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. Meanwhile the construction of states’ social identities ensues from their ‘corporate identity’. This identity is composed basically by a narrative that links a group of people to a territory, and exists independently from the corporate identity of other states. This implies accepting the ontological precedence of the state in relation to the international system and, therefore, conferring a pre-social nature to the corporate identity. In these terms the corporate identity is the material substance that makes interaction possible between states, functioning as a platform for the construction of social identities. Thus, states begin an interaction knowing what they are (states), and throughout the process they define their type (social identities): friends, rivals or enemies. It is only through this previous definition of the social identity that it becomes possible to infer the states’ interests: that which states ‘want’ depends on the specific type states ‘are’.

Although this branch of constructivism emphasises the importance of social processes in the construction of states’ identities, Wendt’s structuralist viewpoint has been strongly criticised for being based on the existence of a pre-social state and for causally relating the identity of states to their interests. As far as the first of these aspects is concerned, critics say that the corporate
identity limits the potential of the constructivist approach, since states are naturalised, and concern with the processes giving rise to them, as well as with normative issues coming out of it, is neglected. Moreover, the acceptance of a pre-social state materially instituted prevents identities from being treated as the result of discourses, since from this perspective it is possible to discern the existence of divergent narratives about the identity of the same state, something that would compromise the assumptions of the Wendtian approach. The causal relationship between identities and interests is criticised, in turn, for the practical difficulty it poses for differentiating between a change of identity and a change in the interests of actors, as well as the acceptance of the causal relationship between identities and interests being unidirectional, with identities determining interests, since the opposite path is also possible when relations of co-constitution are privileged in the explanation of the construction of identities.

Muppidi offers the alternative adopted in this paper. According to him, the acceptance that reality is socially constructed should imply the existence of multiple realities, since different actors, whether they are states or groups of individuals, live in distinct social realities. In this sense the author suggests that the term ‘interest’ should be replaced by the expression ‘social claims’ and that the concept of structure should give room to the notion of ‘social imaginary’. The use of ‘social claims’ has the objective of emphasising the normative and relational character of preferences, in the sense that the actors’ aspirations presuppose a previous interpretation of the identity they want, which, in its turn, stems from the way they evaluate their own history of social interactions with others. This allows for different narratives about identity to coexist within the same state, where the key to understanding its origins is in the interaction between them and in the way they define themselves from their own interpretation of the international context. In turn, the different interpretations of the international operate in different social imaginaries, within which social claims make sense. The notion of social imaginary ‘refers to the structuring principles underlying the set of meanings and social relations and constituting them in specific social identities’. Social imaginaries are constituted through the way objects, subjects and distinct interpretations are articulated, and they depend on the response—interpellation—that the actors give to these articulations.

To the extent that what is at stake are social claims, and not interests, the politico-normative aspect contained in the attempt at defining identities and interests is always explicitly invoked. Such politicisation allows us to overcome the idea that the structure of the international system is, besides material, also a structure of social roles, in that it is possible to treat the very distribution of roles as a result of the projection of different social imaginaries in the international sphere. Through this perspective it is also possible to accept that a state’s identities change or remain the same independently of the actions of other states. What happens sometimes is that groups inside a state have different social claims about its identity; when they are in power, they project these social claims abroad.
Manifestations of BRICS identities

Brazil

The character of Brazilian identity under President Collor de Mello can be inferred from a reading of his speeches in the UNGA. In 1991, Collor mentions the privilege of living in a period marked by the ‘universal affirmation of the individual’s rights and freedoms, of pluralism, of respect for the will of the majority, of protection of minorities and of free enterprise’. Overall Brazil presented itself to the international community as a responsible partner which promoted disarmament in its region, which knew that radical changes in the international economic order were no more than ‘simplistic dreams’ and which, because of this, held that real reforms should begin at the domestic level.

The domestic political crisis that led to the impeachment of President Collor soon altered the direction of Brazilian foreign policy and Itamar Franco’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Celso Amorim, laid the groundwork for what would become, almost a decade later, the resumption of Brazil’s developmental identity. However, in 1995, with the coming to power of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazil returned to identifying less with developmentalism. In his speech at the commemorative session of 50 years of the United Nations, Cardoso stated that the post-cold war world was characterised by an increasing convergence between the values of democracy, free markets and social justice. According to his Foreign Minister, Luiz Felipe Lampreia, the three values cited by Cardoso would be related to the freedom and prosperity of all countries, in an international environment in which the concept of the power of a state would no longer correspond to military force. In this context the diplomat emphasised the country’s efforts to carry out privatisation and structural reforms, so as to ensure the consolidation of economic stability and sustainable growth. The development agenda would not be marked by the North–South divide, but by the need to improve mechanisms for economic cooperation in order to increase the earnings of all—therefore the need to foster the creation of regional blocs.

These were the main features of Brazil’s external position during President Cardoso’s first mandate. However, early in his second term, the country showed signs of discomfort in relation to the ‘pragmatism’ of the liberal international order. The most significant aspect was seen during the inaugural speech of the re-elected president, in which Cardoso stood clearly against unilateralism and the use of force in international relations. In the following year Brazilian discourse regained its developmental contours. Lampreia identified the 1990s as a period in which the international community failed to take advantage of available resources to promote progress for all. Recalling the motto of the French Revolution, the diplomat affirmed his apprehension that the advance of freedom in the world would occur at the expense of equality and fraternity. Developed countries were accused of having a liberal discourse and a protectionist practice, which was described as intolerable and impermissible discrimination once it affected precisely those in greatest need of access to markets.

In 2003, in his first speech at the UNGA, President Lula emphasised the developmental rhetoric of his predecessor and laid the groundwork for what would be the guidelines of foreign policy during his two terms, a project undertaken...
by Celso Amorim, once again as minister of foreign affairs. The president recalled that trade liberalisation should not impose barriers to the ability of countries to formulate autonomous industrial, technological, social and environmental policies. Trade was treated from this perspective as a means of development and of combating poverty, and not as an end in itself. Regarding UN reform, the president suggested that the relevant role it was assumed the Economic and Social Council would play when the UN was founded would be resumed, and he reinforced the Brazilian candidacy for the Security Council as a representative of the developing countries. Moreover, the country positioned itself in the world as a global actor which, besides regional partnerships, would seek further alternatives of cooperation with Russia, China, India, South Africa and the Arab world.\(^\text{18}\)

In 2008, in the wake of the international economic crisis, President Lula reinforced his commitment to development, called the subsidies of rich countries to sectors of their economies ‘scandalous’ and expressed his hope that the Doha round would have a positive impact on food production in order to assist governments in combating hunger. His endorsement of developmentalism was accompanied by an assessment of the new world geopolitics, marked by the abandonment of comfortable alliances with the traditional centres of power, and by a proactive stance by the developing countries that would seek to cooperate without the intermediation of the great powers, as in the cases of IBSA, the G-20 and BRICS. Although he insisted that this new ‘attitude’ was not confrontational against the old centres of power, Lula made clear the desire of the developing countries to encourage a more just multipolar order.\(^\text{19}\) Dilma Roussef’s election to the presidency in 2010 and the choice of Antonio Patriota as Minister of Foreign Affairs do not seem to have altered the course of Brazil’s developmental role in international politics.

The Russian Federation

After the demise of the USSR Russia spared no efforts to present itself to the international community as a country governed by democratic forces, whose internal objectives would seek a compromise with liberal economic reforms, and whose external objectives sought a good relationship with regional neighbours, Europe and the USA. When delivering a speech at the UNGA in 1992, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Andrei Kozyrev, stated that Russia had ‘rejected communism’ and learned from its own experience that ‘there were no alternatives to democracy’, so that only ‘an open society and a politics of openness could enable Russia to find and play to the fullest its unique role in history’.\(^\text{20}\) Assured that its past as an aggressive great power would no longer be repeated, Kozyrev devised as a focal point for Russia’s foreign policy the establishment of ‘partnerships and alliances in favor of democracy and market economy with countries that shared these values’, denying any ‘imperialist ambitions, diktat and violence, both in the area of former USSR and in other parts of the world’.\(^\text{21}\)

The tone of Kozyrev’s speech provides the contours for the performance of Russian diplomacy in the early 1990s. It is in the context of support for
humanitarian intervention as a practice of defence of human rights, support for arms control and disarmament and defence of development associated with the liberal economic order that the term ‘multipolarity’ emerged, when Kozyrev described the post-communist and post-confrontational world after the Cold War as a ‘multipolar unity in diversity’, whose greatest symbol would be the United Nations. This related, in fact, to a multipolarity in terms of the existence of other powers in a world united by the ideals of the great winning superpower, and not a multipolarity in the classical sense, which denotes poles disputing power in the international arena.

The beginning of Russian inflection in relation to this reading of ‘unity in diversity’ occurred in 1995. Reflecting on 50 years of the United Nations, Kozyrev argued that the term acquired its meaning from the legacy of this historical experience, namely that ‘equality between states and respect for the diversity of cultures, religions and national traditions can serve as the basis for the security and prosperity in the modern world’. Reflecting on 50 years of the United Nations, Kozyrev argued that the term acquired its meaning from the legacy of this historical experience, namely that ‘equality between states and respect for the diversity of cultures, religions and national traditions can serve as the basis for the security and prosperity in the modern world’.22 The replacement of Kozyrev by Yevgeni Primakov marked the definite admission of a new interpretation of the concept of multipolarity in Russian diplomacy. In his speech to the General Assembly in 1996, Primakov identified the problems faced by the organisation as stemming from the transition between a period of bloc confrontation to another, marked by multipolarity, economic interdependence and democratisation of international relations. In this context of transition the diplomat offered three conditions for the maintenance of peace. The first was that the old way of thinking in terms of antagonistic blocs would not be replaced by the creation of new boundaries between states. The second condition was that states would abandon the mindset according to which there were leaders and followers in world politics, a stance based on the assessment that the end of the Cold War was marked by the emergence of winners and losers. The third condition to be observed was that the maintenance of peace depended on the coordinated actions of the international community.23

The denial of unipolarity and the affirmation of different poles in search of coordination are the keynotes of the concept of multipolarity for Russian diplomacy in the 21st century. In 2006 the architecture of the international system was described as multipolar, leaving no other alternative, in the Russian evaluation, than multilateral diplomacy to solve the problems of the world. In this context Sergei Lavrov heavily criticised the barriers created by NATO to the new negotiations on conventional forces in Europe.24 In 2007 multipolarity was described for the first time as a ‘new geopolitical situation’, and Russia argued that, thanks to the emergence of new centres of global growth, world governance should be exercised by the collective leadership of the major states, so that different regions and civilisations would be represented.25 In 2008 the events between Russia and Georgia led Lavrov to state that the unipolar ‘illusion’ or ‘mirage’ was behind the attacks on South Ossetia, in a clear interpretation that US unilateral measures in relation to Iraq, the anti-missile shield and the militarisation of space, among others, had created incentives for the Georgians to act hastily and provoke a Russian reaction.26 It is in this context of revival of the practical existence of multipolarity against the unipolar illusion, and against the backdrop of the crisis of 2008, that attempts to reform
the international economic order with the participation of some developing countries were conceived, along with other multilateral initiatives by Russia, such as BRIC. The pronouncements of President Medvedev and Lavrov reinforce the trend towards this conception of a multipolar world.27

India

In 1991 India’s foreign minister, Madhav Singh Solanki warned that the overall economic environment for developing countries was unfavourable, because it was marked by the lack of technology needed to promote growth, by scarce resources and unbalanced terms of trade, etc. He addressed the members of the General Assembly, asserting that the disparities among countries had widened. On behalf of the developing nations the country denounced the use of non-economic criteria (good governance, human rights, environment, etc) in the calculus of bilateral economic cooperation. At the same time Solanki also stated the need to reform the Security Council by expanding its membership.28 In 1993 Dinesh Singh gave a speech in which security issues were clearly related to development problems.29 In 1994 Pranab Mukherjee went further and affirmed that India had the right to be a permanent member of the Council. He described the economic situation in even worse terms. India identified itself as a developing country active in promoting South–South cooperation, emphasising that the East–West divide should not be replaced by a North–South one.30 The following year Mukherjee affirmed that development was ‘the single most import task’ for the international community, and criticised the United Nations because it represented ‘the privilege of a few rather than the interests of the many’.31

In 1997 India’s Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Inder Kumar Gujral, spoke about the relevance of the non-aligned movement after the Cold War, because ‘it expressed the overwhelming need of previously colonized and disempowered nations to a voice, a perspective and an agenda in a politically and economically unequal and inequitable world’. He reaffirmed the connection between peace, security and development, emphasising that development should be the priority of the UN. The foreign minister also highlighted the fact that India was promoting new partnerships while maintaining traditional relations with the USA, Russia, the EU and Japan.32 In 1998 Behari Vajpayee reproduced the well known depiction of India as a developing country, and emphasised that, for the United Nations to be more representative of the international reality, developing countries should be made permanent members of the Security Council. He also criticised the triumphalism that was associated with the global capitalism of the 1990s, asking for a more cautious view of globalisation and for prudent policies in promoting economic liberalisation.33

The tendency to associate security and development continued and, in 2001, commenting on the September 11 attacks, Vajpayee demanded the end of trade protectionism and justified India’s refusal to accept new issues in the agenda of the World Trade Organization (WTO), affirming that ‘nearly 6000 lives were lost on 11 September, but the global economic downturn in its aftermath will take a far larger human toll, mainly in the developing world’.34 At the same time India offered its services to coordinate a global dialogue on development. In 2002 the
diplomat reinforced his offer to coordinate a world development dialogue, and added that the world was in need of ‘collective multilateralism’. In 2003 Vajpayee discussed the fight against poverty, reminding the General Assembly that ‘international economic relations continue[ed] to be characterized by inequities and inequalities’. His speech was also marked by warnings against the threat of terrorism, as a result of tensions with Pakistan.

From 2004 to 2011 India’s emphasis on the development–security linkage remained the same. In 2004 Manmohan Singh, India’s then prime minister, had described his country as being ‘on the move’, on the frontiers of economic, technological and developmental transformations. According to him, India had the capabilities and capacities to ‘participate in the restructuring of a just and dynamic world order’. In the following year Natwar Singh, Minister of Foreign Affairs, illustrated the way India was acting to change the world by mentioning the IBSA initiative to alleviate poverty and hunger and the ‘Techno-Economic Approach for Africa-India Movement’, a partnership intended to promote technology transfer to Africa. In 2009 the new Foreign Minister, SM Khrisna, affirmed that the ‘international governance structures [were] neither inclusive nor participatory’ and demanded the restructuring of these institutions in a way that would give developing countries greater responsibility. In the same speech, India presented ‘livelihood security’ and poverty alleviation as the main imperatives for the country. Indian authorities offered the same interpretation of the world in the following two years.

China

In 1991 Qian Qichen assured listeners that Chinese foreign policy would still be guided by the five principles of the non-aligned movement: mutual respect for sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. China was depicted as a developing country that would have to face a very gloomy international economic scenario in the near future. According to Qichen, ‘the discrepancies between North and South [were] aggravated by the widening economic gap and the increasing inequality between rich and poor’, such that ‘imbalanced development’ could lead to ‘a more turbulent world situation’. An unfair economic order, characterised by the imposition of political conditionalities in exchange for aid, was at the roots of the problem. In this sense the emphasis of developed countries on the need to abide by formal human rights standards was presented as inaccurate, as long as the Chinese saw ‘the most fundamental human right [a]s the right to subsistence and development’.

In the following year Qichen denounced the fact that hegemonism and power politics where still present on the international scene, although the world had entered a new historical phase of transition towards multipolarity. Because of the unfair disparities between rich and poor, the demand for reform of the UN should attach great importance to the ‘question of development’. In 1993 he continued to insist that reform of the Security Council ‘should take due account of the principle of equitable geographical distribution and should accommodate the interests of the developing countries which make up the overwhelming
majority of the membership’.\(^42\) In 1994 the role the UN had in promoting development was re-emphasised, and China called for the abolition of protectionism and discrimination in economic relations worldwide.\(^43\)

This emphasis on development and multipolarity was also present during the tenure of Tang Jiaxuan as China’s foreign minister, but it was marked by greater assertiveness. In 1998 China depicted itself as a developing country and manifested the opinion that its entry into the WTO would have to be negotiated on this basis. In the same year the Chinese diplomat made clear that the Security Council was not a ‘club of rich countries’ and asked for a balanced representation of developed and developing countries in the organ. Taiwan’s status was reconfirmed as ‘an inalienable part of China’s sacred territory’, and the return of Hong Kong and Macao to China were both seen as good examples for the solution of the problem.\(^44\)

In 1999 China denounced the expansion of military blocs (implicitly, NATO) as the new expression of hegemonism and power politics. The country also demanded that developed countries should assume more obligations regarding the effects of international economic crisis, and defended the developing countries’ ‘right to equal participation in world economic decision-making and the formulation of relevant rules’.\(^45\) In the following year China demanded that the UN take ‘necessary measures’ to hinder a ‘certain country’ from developing a missile defence system, a measure characterised as a ‘dangerous development’ that would affect global strategic stability. China also pointed to the technological gap between rich and poor, and defended the right to equal participation in economic decision making by developing countries.\(^46\)

In the security realm the assertiveness of China’s statements was formalised in the proposition of new security concept, presented to the General Assembly in 2002. According to Jiaxuan, the concept was based on three principles: mutual trust, mutual benefit, and equality. The first principle demanded that countries should abandon the cold war mentality based on enmity and should prioritise dialogue in solving their differences; the second underlined the point that one country’s search for economic development could not threat the security of others; and the third intended to foment democracy in international affairs. In the economic realm China repeated the need to change the ‘rules of the game’ in order to promote changes towards a more just world. With this intention in mind, the country proposed the adoption of five initiatives: 1) establishing a global partnership geared to development; 2) promoting a balanced and steady development of economic globalisation; 3) strengthening developing countries’ capacity for self-development; 4) persisting in the course of sustainable development; and 5) enhancing an all-round development of the people.\(^47\)

From 2003 to 2008 China has identified itself as ‘the major developing country’ that would promote the interest of other developing countries in an international context marked by the transition to multipolarity. As an example of such practice, the Chinese leadership kept demanding that the developed countries honour their commitments concerning debt reduction, technology transfer and market access. At the same time the country urged developing countries to cooperate to achieve development through the strengthening of South–South relations. The concrete example that China had to offer was its cooperation with
Africa, which was based on ‘political respect and equality and economic mutual benefit and win-win cooperation’.48

In 2009 Hu Jintao went further in the defence of developing countries, when he affirmed that ‘the reform of the Security Council should aim, as a priority, to increase the representation of the developing countries, African countries in particular’.49 In the following year, Jiabao acknowledged that China was seen in the world as an emergent power but minimised this label, explaining that his country had made ‘an historic leap from mere subsistence to moderate prosperity’. According to Jiabao, the real China was ‘still in the primary stage of socialism and remain[ed] a developing country’.50

**South Africa**

In 1994 at his first speech at the UNGA as South Africa’s president, Nelson Mandela defined the identity of his country, affirming that the watchwords in this process should be ‘justice, peace, reconciliation and nation-building in the pursuit of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist country’. After its exclusion from the international community during the apartheid period, his country was being accepted as a member in an interdependent world ‘bound together to a common destiny’. A new universal reality based on democracy, peace, prosperity and interdependence was emerging. Accordingly, South Africa would desire a more protagonist role in the Security Council and would promote South–South cooperation and the ‘voice of the poor and disadvantaged in the ordering of world affairs’. In order to achieve this, South Africa portrayed itself as the voice of the disadvantaged.51

It seems that the politics of reconciliation on the inside should also have been applied to the outside. In 1995 South Africa’s Foreign Minister, Alfred Nzo, saw UNCTAD as a forum ‘where a strong partnership for development between the developed and the developing countries can, and must, be forged’.52 Notwithstanding his concern with the marginalisation of the least developed countries from the process of globalisation and liberalisation, his positive views on how the new universal reality could bring benefits to all was reaffirmed the following year, when he noted that in Southern Africa ‘processes of democratization have released a host of productive human and political resources’, which served as the base for the South African’s view that ‘the highest possible degree of economic cooperation, mutual assistance and the joint planning of regional development initiatives, leading to full economic integration’ was a feasible goal.53 In 1997, besides reiterating that human rights were the cornerstone of South African foreign policy, Nzo endorsed the suggestion of the Organization of African States that the expansion of the Security Council would have to consider the new membership of five non-permanent and two permanent members from Africa to improve UN representativeness.54

Under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) there was an inflection, and the irreconcilability between the developed and the developing world became the tone of South Africa’s speeches at the UNGA. This perspective was still incipient in 1999, when Mbeki claimed that the democratisation of the system of global governance, like the reform of the UN, was a necessary
compensatory movement against the tendencies, caused by globalisation, to redefine the concept of sovereignty at the expense of the smaller countries of the world. Mbeki’s Foreign Minister, Dlamini-Zuma, described these tendencies when he said, ‘while billions of people are degraded and dehumanized by poverty, disease and hunger there are indeed enough resources in the world to feed, educate and restore the dignity of human beings and make this world a better place for all’ and inferred that the cause of this situation was the fact that ‘decisions are taken outside the UN and other global structures by developed and rich countries when these decisions have a great impact on the poorer countries and directly affect the lives of billions of poor people’. In this sense, he asked for reform of the Bretton Woods institutions in order to deal with the demands of the developing countries.

In the following years South Africa viewed the world as a global village, but one that was remarkably divided between rich and poor, where ‘some have emerged as the dominant, and the rest as the dominated, with the dominant being the decision makers, and the dominated being the recipients and implementers of these decisions’. The stark contrast and irreconcilable nature of the split was maintained because ‘the rich are concerned about ways and means to maintain the status quo from which they benefit’ and the poor ‘will not accept the maintenance of the status quo, which perpetuates their poverty’. In this scenario South Africa abandoned its position of representative of the disadvantaged, and assumed its identity as a developing country ‘whose central challenge is the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment, a challenge we share with the rest of the African continent of which we are an integral part’.

From this point on, South Africa became very assertive at the UNGA. In 2006, after questioning whether the ‘impoverishment of the poor’ was ‘to the advantage of the rich’, Mbeki addressed the floor in a poignant manner when he argued that something was ‘seriously wrong when people risk life and limb travelling in suffocating containers to Western Europe in search of a better life’. In 2007 he observed that the effects of globalisation perpetuated many features of what he called ‘a global system of apartheid’: ‘one developed and globally connected and another localised and informal’. Although less confrontationist, the Zuma presidency has been marked by the same emphasis on development.

**What can the analysis of BRICS’ social claims tell us?**

Considering the previous section as a whole, the striking characteristic that emerges is how China’s and India’s self-depiction and their description of international relations remained the same throughout the period under discussion. Since the beginning both China and India have identified themselves as developing countries fighting for a just order in a world passing through a transition from bipolarity to multipolarity. Both emphasised the need to expand the Security Council, and both criticised the unilateral policies of other countries. They also emphasised the need to transform the existing structures of economic governance. Closer to the present, the association between development and security became more evident in both, as well as the strengthening of
their relations with Africa. Both discourses could be described as having a developmental–multipolar nature.

The discourses of Brazil, Russia and South Africa are marked by drastic changes that began during the 1990s and were consolidated in the 2000s. Although the three cases bear relevant differences, at the general level it is possible to confirm that in the early 1990s these countries accepted the unilateral nature of international relations. Attached to this recognition came the view that liberalism, structured around the pillars of free economic enterprise, political democracy and respect for human rights, would promote development and a fair international order. These discourses had a liberal–unilateral nature.

Brazil adopted a clear liberal set of values at the beginning of the 1990s and strove to profit from what its diplomats and its president considered to be the unipolar situation in the aftermath of the Cold War. This view was still predominant during Cardoso’s first term, as the adoption of ‘globalisation as an opportunity’ and the praising of market efficiency made clear. In his second term, when globalisation was associated with exclusionary practices and Lampreia began to accuse rich countries of protectionism, the process towards a developmental identity began to consolidate. With Lula and Amorim achieving development and promoting multipolarity became the cornerstones of Brazilian foreign policy. In Russia this social claim was abandoned by the end of the Kozyrev period. The new Russian vision about itself and the world changed radically with Primakov and his emphasis on the multipolar nature of international relations. Later, with Lavrov, developmental colours were incorporated into this view. During Mandela’s presidency in South Africa the defence of liberalism came through the emphasis on human rights and the politics of reconciliation, which had its external manifestation in the attempt to promote harmony between rich and poor countries. It is noteworthy that South Africa did not identify itself with other poor countries in Africa, but desired the expansion of the United Nations Security Council to be their representative worldwide. With Thabo Mbeki the discourse of conciliation between rich and poor was abandoned and South Africa assumed its developing character by fighting for its interests and, through this process, representing the interests of other developing countries in the African continent.

By the mid-2000s, Brazil, Russia and South Africa could all identify with the developmental–multipolar discourse of China and India. The move from a liberal–unilateral to a developmental–multipolar set of social claims was a truly ‘discursive alignment’ that created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of BRICS. Indeed, development and multipolarity are the cornerstones of the BRICS initiative. From Yekaterinburg to New Delhi, all the final statements made by the heads of states reproduced points present in the previous discourses of China and India at the UNGA, and which were later adopted by the other countries who make up BRICS, namely: non-intervention; technology transfer to promote development; poverty alleviation; reform of the security council; restructuring of the institutions of economic global governance, like the IMF and World Bank; respect for international law; warnings against the perils of a unipolar world; and so on. This conformity among the social claims of all in the BRICS grouping is the key factor to understanding the emergence of BRICS.
Two final comments are important. First, the idea that a set of social claims can initiate a developmental–multipolar discursive formation does not imply that all countries that can be associated with this discourse have the same identity. This is so because there are different emphases on features shared by all of them. For instance, Russia is more multipolar than developmental, while in South Africa the order of intensity of these aspects is the contrary. China and India confer on human rights a different meaning than that one shared by Brazil and South Africa. In some cases there are other dimensions of their identity that are not even shared, like their democratic nature. All in all, this remark underlines the fact that, while countries that share a developmental–multipolar set of social claims may have different ‘identities’, even so they may share the same interests.

The second comment refers to the factors that caused the above-mentioned discursive alignment that initiated BRICS. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to deal with that question, at least three tentative answers are suggested. The first is that the emergence of China as an important economic power dragged Brazil, Russia and South Africa into its sphere of influence, something that can be inferred through the significant importance of China in these countries’ economies. The problem with this answer is that India has shared the same Chinese social claims since the end of the Cold War, but its economy is not that relevant to the other BRICS. So how can the alignment with India’s social claims be explained? The second answer touches upon this point. In fact, the discursive realignment might be interpreted as a response to the consequences of the economic globalisation implemented by the West during the 1990s. Countries like Brazil, Russia and South Africa wanted to be part of the process of liberalisation to promote their own economies, but became frustrated with the non-accomplishment of the promises of globalisation and the social problems that it brought to or aggravated in their economies. In this view the effects of economic globalisation caused their discursive alignment with China, as well as with India. The third answer is that BRICS aligned their social claims as a consequence of the unilateralist policies of the USA from the mid-1990s onwards. NATO’s expansion, the bombing of Iraq, the US presence in South America, the alliance with Pakistan in the war against terrorism are some examples that could have affected the way BRICS characterise the international arena. In fact, these three answers are complementary rather than competitive, and each one deserves more attention in future research.

Notes
BRICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

7 Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics.


Notes on Contributor

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