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Global Bricolage: emerging market powers and polycentric governance

JAMES H MITTELMAN

ABSTRACT Contemporary globalisation is characterised by an explosion of organisational pluralism. Acronyms such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) abound. This proliferation of groupings signals a repositioning within global governance and their names serve as metaphors for adjustments among formal and informal modes of global governance. They may be understood in terms of global bricolage: a framework for analysing incipient assemblages in global governance. Rooted in cultural political economy, this notion offers a language for grasping a loose meshwork of groupings based on certain large countries in the global South. The concept of global bricolage deepens analysis of polycentric governance and enables observers to identify three major tensions that mark contemporary global order. The antinomies are between old and new narratives that represent actual or potential shifts in prevailing forms of global governance, between an emancipatory spirit and contested neoliberal norms, and between interregional coalitions and intraregional differences. Quite clearly, the manner of addressing them will bear greatly on the shape of future world order.

Contemporary globalisation is characterised by an explosion of organisational pluralism. Acronyms such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) abound. But, in substance, do these signifiers and their institutional forms amount to more than metaphors within global governance? Are they beacons for global transformations? Do they both enhance the power of the global South and beget new inequalities?

Unlike other valuable studies (indicated below) that chart the paths of individual emergent countries and provide cross-national comparisons, this article focuses more on interregional dynamics and collective action by emergent market power. As distinct from many descriptive accounts of these phenomena, this project enlists a modest dose of theory—drawn from development studies, international relations theory, social theory and geophilosophy—to throw light on the possible mobility of a handful of countries in the global hierarchy of

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power and wealth. I want to gauge constraints and opportunities for transformations. The objectives in this article are to inquire about harbingers of global shifts, to offer critical reflections on them, and to propose a direction for future research. While citing liberal institutionalism, realism, constructivism and Marxism, this is an attempt to sketch a unifying analytical framework for probing the repositioning of some actors in the global South within global governance.

I will contend that it is heretofore unclear what kinds of tools should be used to come to grips with the evolving hierarchical relationships marking the emergence of market powers. As we shall see, the conceptual problem of how to grasp this multifaceted phenomenon is linked to the nonlinear interplay of wholes and parts, in which action is largely improvised, not pensively planned.

My core argument is that the notion of global *bricolage* advances thinking about polycentric governance and helps identify three tensions in a global order in which certain large countries in the global South wield more resources and power than in previous eras. The antinomies in this order—to be explored in the pages ahead—are between old and new narratives that represent actual or potential shifts in prevailing forms of global governance, between an emancipatory spirit and contested neoliberal norms, and between interregional coalitions and intraregional differences.

The premise of this research is that one can grapple with these dynamics by addressing key analytic quandaries and highlighting the structures that undergird protagonists’ behaviour. Although the structural pressures do not operate automatically or mechanically, they impel institutional arrangements that agents try to adjust in accord with their ideas and interests. To add emphasis to my point, the actors under scrutiny are deemed ‘emergent market powers’, terminology that is meant to bring a political economy perspective to bear. Emergence—a keyword to which we will return—suggests increasing influence and stature in global order.

Before revisiting the matter of language, let us first delve into the diagnostic question of how to construe emergent market power. Second, I want to lay out the concept of global *bricolage*. Third, to historicise this construct, pivotal moments in the rise of a group of market powers in the global South and the role of summity are noted. Fourth, the phenomenon of group forums will be examined. Fifth, this avenue of inquiry will lead to the incongruities themselves and, next, a series of unresolved questions about emerging market powers. Finally, the conclusion offers observations about potential transformations in our complex environment.

**Analytics**

To underscore the obvious, certain alterations in global order are manifest. It is not hard to track their most visible aspects, as with the surge in South–South trade. Consider Brazil, which has an economy larger than that of Italy and is the world’s sixth biggest. Fifty-eight percent of Brazil’s trade is with the global South, 22% of it with other Latin American countries; thus, 36% is intercontinental southern trade. That figure is expected to jump, exceeding trade
with the developed world by a multiple of eight in the next 40 years. Intercontinental South–South trade could easily account for more than half of all of Brazil’s trade by 2050. As in the Brazilian case, trade growth and industrialisation have spurred the ascent of the Chinese and Indian economies, thereby lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, albeit with significant differences among these epicentres’ resource endowments, infrastructure, sectoral emphases, technological development, extent of state intervention in the domestic economy, and sequencing of steps up the value-added ladder.

It is more difficult, however, to comprehend the structural underpinnings of an emergent southern orientation, which is not only a matter of a turn in a global North–global South axis, but also one that rotates in an East–South direction. To complicate the remapping of spatial relations, note that Russia is a part of the BRICS pentagon, although it is not usually considered in the global South and is the only country to be included in both BRICS and the Group of Eight (G8) highly industrialised nations.

That said, such anomalies allow options for the global South other than historical ties to the West and can help to expand policy space. Yet they also stir resentment and conflict. Scholarly and journalistic sources document the performance of China and India in Africa, including the role of these investors in mining, farming, timber, retail and other industries. The use of Chinese nationals to build infrastructure, and exports of cheap clothing, have supplanted local labour, provoking the ire of trade unions in recipient countries, precipitating discourses about re-colonisation and sparking violent protests. Research on this topic traces the linkages to outbreaks of conflict, as over the supply of resources, particularly oil, the impact of new investors on the petro-states in Africa, questions of human rights standards, and competition among the emerging market powers—a theme picked up again in the following discussion.

Although studies of the concrete phenomena themselves are rich in data and valuable for their insights, delimiting the entry points for analysis of emergent market power requires more careful attention. To mark them, one may distinguish four standpoints for approaching this emergence, and, of course, each one evinces variants within it. The main positions may be delineated as follows: first, the sky-high view from the apex of global power focuses on challenges to the status quo. How, for example, do the new configurations affect the USA and, for Washington, what opportunities are presented? From a second angle, voices within each emerging country address how to use platforms for negotiating global issues, such as climate change and food supply, as well as exerting greater influence on a world stage. As intimated, inflections include doubt about the extent to which these actors really work together or are at loggerheads over energy and other resources. Third, and building on what has been said, coalitions and flexible alliances’ raison d’être is the forging of joint action, for instance by modifying the IMF’s quota system for voting. Fourth, another prism looks beyond state–market relations and concentrates on institutional embeddedness in social forces (including class, caste, race, ethnicity, gender, religious groups and generational differences) prompting global power shifts.
These frames are often combined in practice. The framing takes the form of narratives that attempt to capture the overall pattern. US public intellectuals have famously told stories about the West versus the Rest and a flat world, accounts that purportedly explicate power shifts as well as grave risks and possibilities. More recently France’s mainstream politicians on both the left and right—among them, Arnaud Montebourg, author of Votez pour la démondialisation! (Vote for De-globalisation!) and left-leaning intellectuals, such as Emmanuel Todd, Frédéric Lordon and Jacques Sapir, have produced very different scripts. Faulting excessive liberalisation, they advocate de-globalisation as the antidote to unfettered competition resulting in the loss of jobs to emerging market powers and in large-scale unemployment, especially acute for youth. It is worth noting that the idea of de-globalisation has spread from the global South to the global North. A sociologist and congressman in the Philippines House of Representatives, Walden Bello, one of the authors of the term de-globalisation, had already worked it into a counter-narrative to critique the impact of neoliberal globalisation’s integrating and fragmenting effects, and to imagine alternative strategies for navigating global order.

Analytically crucial, the structural basis of groupings such as BRICS, IBSA and BASIC remains at issue. Observers variously emphasise states, suggested by the second word in ‘emerging powers’; markets, as in ‘emerging markets’—not surprisingly, since Goldman Sachs’s Jim O’Neill invented the term ‘BRIC’ as a marketing label in 2001 (later expanded to include South Africa); ‘emerging societies’, from a more sociological angle; and state–market–society interactions, the perspective adopted in this article. But there is more to trying to ascertain the motors of change. Emergence denotes clusters of self-organisation that are responding strategically to the global political economy in which they are enmeshed. They are adapting organically to a dynamic system. The micro-elements contribute to constituting macro-behaviour in an increasingly polycentric world. The politics of emergence is a crucial part of this phenomenon. It is worth emphasising that the rubric ‘emerging markets’ omits the politics and that the header ‘emerging powers’ or ‘rising powers’ reflects the economics. Overcoming this separation, with its implicit primacy of either economics or politics, seems preferable.

But what, if anything, do emerging market powers linked in a loose meshwork of international groupings have in common? Is it that the constituent members are marked by large economies that have opened up, by high rates of economic growth and by strides to augment their power in global governance when US hegemony is, arguably, declining? Are there other unifying factors?

In fact, critics might say that BRICS, IBSA and BASIC are little more than imaginary lines without real group identities rooted in lived experience. Contrary to the claims of enthusiasts who tout these informal forums, sceptics contend that they are more symbolic than empirically significant, especially absent shared loyalties among citizens. Furthermore, these groupings may be seen as vehicles for pacts among elites in their efforts to promote global value chains. And constructivists would submit that the imaginaries—ideational factors—play a decisive role in shaping the interests in play.
Clearly, intellectuals have done their share to fashion these representations and establish a research enterprise for universities and think-tanks. The production of books, articles, portals, datasets and courses on South-South cooperation is becoming a prodigious industry for shedding light on emerging market powers. Funding agencies and other components of the knowledge structure have helped build this machinery. Some of these ventures have spawned Southern realism, which adapts a Northern-derived approach and its state-centred notions about national territoriality and sovereignty. Other initiatives have found ways to think anew about transnational and trans-scalar issues such as ethnic Chinese and Indian diasporas long resident in Africa and Latin America, and labour segmentation that connects continents, including migrant networks that channel flows of remittances, other goods, skills and ideas.

These conceptual issues raise methodological questions. What is an appropriate span of time to study? Much of the work in this field of inquiry is conjunctural, because the phenomena being investigated appear recent; but the analytical themes noted above, some of them stemming from the dynamics of capitalism itself, require a longer view of 50 or more years. In addition, the ontology—the objects of inquiry—brings in the aforementioned units of analysis: namely, globalising processes, transnational corporations, regions, states, international and subnational organisations, cities and social structures. This multilevel research implies that boundaries are blurred and being redrawn. The researcher must reflect on who is in, who is out, and who is authorised to constitute these categories. Rethinking the analytical and methodological challenges is critical for understanding a turn towards polycentric global governance. But what is an appropriate approach?

Knowledge production

While knowledge production on emerging market powers varies, the extant framing is predominantly realist, neoclassical in its orientation to economics, largely ahistorical and highly eclectic, except for some important contributions that play off one conception against another. In an attempt at reframing, I hold that while the iconography of emerging market powers (BRICS, IBSA, BASIC, and so on) may be construed as a social construction, the naming is also a register of realignments in the global political economy. The nomenclature itself constitutes a discursive move. To probe its mechanisms, one can profitably invoke the concept of *bricolage*, which drills down deeper than this word’s literal meaning of tinkering.

In the seminal writings of French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, *bricolage* is more than going along without forethought. The *bricoleur* uses imagination and deploys whatever tools are at hand. Nevertheless, *bricolage* is not carefully prepared and is quite unlike the deliberate manner in which engineers plan their work. The one is more spontaneous; the other, systematic, often with the use of a blueprint. This distinction has served as a springboard for critical thinking. Adding to Lévi-Strauss’s insight, the post-structural philosopher Jacques Derrida applied it to unpick dominant discourses. For the Algerian-born Derrida deconstruction is a means to rethink difference and help prevent
grotesque violence, even if justice is an elusive, or even illusionary, goal. In Derrida’s sense, *bricolage* is not, then, only improvisation or a jumble of *ad hoc* processes, but also a way to parse texts, speech and political institutions.

Additionally, anthropologists, notably Mary Douglas, have advanced the notion of *cultural bricolage*, employing it as a tool in their research on rites, rituals, celebrations, kinship, networks, and the like.\(^2^2\) Political scientists may also be interested in exploring *institutional bricolage*: applications that centre on innovations in the landscape of power. And for specialists in international studies focused on global governance, *intellectual bricolage* would extend to new thinking, including reassemblies that confer meaning and relate cognitive to non-cognitive processes. Groupings of emerging market powers embody these elements in constituting *global bricolage*. Hence, the clusters **BRICS**, **IBSA** and **BASIC** are emblematic of evolving global shifts, institutional adaptation and policy intellectuals’ ideas. My point is that these icons manifest concretely, with tangible effects. To grasp them, one must contextualise trends and be mindful of key historical markers.

A note on historical momentum

In the 17th and 18th centuries the Chinese and Indian economies were centres of global trade. Hubs in their own right, their commercial activities spanned Eurasia and the oceans. In this respect China and India may now be considered to be *re-emerging*, rather than emerging, market powers. The big interruption in their rise came during the period between 1870 and 1950, when Asia’s per capita income plunged from one-half to one-tenth of Western European levels.\(^2^3\)

Following British hegemony, and with the American ascent, Washington maintained a dominant position and sought to make global economic governance workable. In the post-World War II period, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, the USA and its allies used international institutions to help manage economic crises in the developing world: among others, Mexico in 1994–95; Asia, 1997–98; and Argentina, 2001–2002. To speed recovery, at least before the 2008 Great Recession, most countries in the global South repaid their debts and self-insured by building reserves. Some developing countries have found ways to lessen their vulnerability to global shocks.

As we have seen, one pattern is to band together in global forums. Acting in concert, though not without friction, emerging market powers have established sufficient policy space to become major actors on the global stage. Their clout is partly the result of the sheer magnitude of their populations and economies. China and India are home to about 40% of the world’s population, constitute two of the three largest economies in Asia, and maintain bilateral trade worth $60 billion, though tipping towards China’s higher-value finished products. Meanwhile, the size of the Brazilian and South African economies is unsurpassed in their own regions. According to *The Economist* (15 April 2010), the **BRIC** countries, ‘the only developing economies with
The Economist goes on to indicate that their foreign reserves are six times as great as the assets of the IMF. Meanwhile, the BRIC(s)' responses to intractable global problems are in flux.

Renovating global order

In efforts to renovate global order, state-to-state summitry is, of course, a mainstay. Beyond UN mega-conferences and sundry global commissions, the evolving pattern is to ‘summitise’ global problems, especially by G-shopping for clubs of formal and informal governance bodies. These multifarious projects bring together developed and developing countries in forums such as the Group of 20 (G20) as well as in clubs of emerging market powers. A conspicuous feature is their overlapping membership. All countries in BRICS, IBSA and BASIC belong to the G20. But the groupings are not identical. IBSA does not include China and Russia, and BASIC is without Russia.

At one level such initiatives may be seen as forms of multilateralism. But what kind of multilateralism? Conventionally multilateralism refers to an institutional arrangement for ‘coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles [of conduct].’ Yet the liberal-institutional variant of multilateralism typically sidelines civil society and social movements. By comparison, transformative multilateralism entails a commitment to broaden the roles of non-state forces in global governance arrangements. It calls for extending dialogue and increasing participation as a way to resolve conflict and forge institutional practices. Although the latter form of multilateralism seems to be more of a potential than an actuality, it would appear that today’s fluid environment is furthering polycentric global governance, a reaction to multiple pressures from above and below.

A joint response to these forces is what may be deemed a type of minilateralism. Power holders in the developed and developing worlds pursue this route. The rationale is to form a caucus within larger settings of global governance, to pilot and test new ideas, and to project normative visions of global order in discrete settings. Beneath these ostensible objectives lie the deeper issues: namely, finding ways to prevent fissures from erupting and reforming the regime of capitalism in which power agents are stakeholders.

Evidently a hybrid system of global governance is taking shape. But the extant language and wisdom about global governance are limitations. They only partially capture incipient patterns beyond the conventional picture of myriad tendencies and the principal coordinating mechanisms in need of renovation.

Seeking new directions, the group formations encounter three tensions characteristic of strivings for global order and, perforce, policy making within the parameters that mark these conundrums. Each one, a trend, begets a countertrend. Point and counterpoint are delimited below.
Antinomies in global bricolage

Continuities and discontinuities

Narratives about rising power on a world level are hardly novel. The production of discourses about an intermediate zone began long ago. Stories concerning a Middle Kingdom, middle powers, sub-imperial states, a semi-periphery and tiger economies (also called newly industrialising countries) chime with enduring patterns in international relations and development. Nonetheless, the contemporary vector of emergent market powers bears its own historical specificity. This trajectory is not simply a re-run of the past but, as demarcated here, has special features.

Emancipation and contested neoliberal norms

In the second decade of this millennium South–South multilateralism is redolent of earlier emancipatory projects: normative aspirations and matters of ends and means. But which narrative of emancipation is paramount? A strong tendency is to revive the spirit of Bandung, where the non-aligned nations convened during the Cold War, and of the Group of 77, a network of developing countries launched in 1964. Arguably a new version of global populism, a G-South, also known as G-Bandung, is afoot. Yet the present-day embrace of conventional multilateral initiatives in the World Trade Organization and the Bretton Woods institutions reaffirms neoliberal norms and reflects the vulnerabilities in a tiered system of summity, formal groupings and informal clubs.

Regionalism and uneven development

For emergent market powers putative interregional coalitions are the order of the day. However, when clubs like BRICS, IBSA and BASIC designate one state as a regional leader in an exclusive constellation of stars, intraregional differences are heightened. How is Nigeria, for instance, to regard South African leadership in global coalitions? Far more populous, larger in area and richer in energy resources than is South Africa, though not as technologically developed or as prosperous on a per capita basis, Nigeria is an obvious candidate for a prominent role in continental leadership. Is Pretoria entitled, and does it presume, to represent Abuja, or Africans in other countries, on a global stage? The point is that in choosing one among other regional actors, the risk lies in repeating a pattern of exclusivity to which colonialism and imperialism subjected the now emerging market powers themselves. However, a caveat must be noted: the Russian case is an outlier. Russia has been the dominant actor in its neighbourhood and, in recent years, has met with limited success in Eurasia. Moscow’s bid to be a regional hegemon is diminished by the use of coercion in Georgia, disputes in Ukraine over resources, prices and supplies, and refusal to extend preferential energy rates to Belarus.
Insofar as BRICSdom, or selected membership in other such groupings, augments the status of a regional heavyweight, concern about hegemony within the region grows. For example, the number of protests, especially by indigenous people, against Brazilian resource grabs and hydroelectric projects in Bolivia is mounting. As a sign of bitterness towards substantial numbers of immigrants from Brazil who control land and use it for large-scale agriculture, activists in Paraguay have burned Brazilian flags. So, too, Argentines, Ecuadorians and Peruvians have objected to Brazilian business practices and projects, leading to denunciations of plans by Brazil’s national development bank to build roads, to legal battles and to more revolts by indigenous peoples.32

In policy arenas political authorities seek to manage the set of antinomies in creative and adaptive ways. At the same time, scholars struggle with how to explain them.

An aid to understanding these moves and countermoves is the Polanyian concept of ‘embeddedness’. During the 20th century, when the Great Depression led to world war and vast institutional change, Karl Polanyi introduced the notion of a double movement.33 The expansion and deepening of the market prompted a countermovement: efforts at self-protection by vulnerable groups hurt by the jagged elements of this massive transformation. Facing a disembedded market, resistant forces not only organised but also sought to reassert greater social and political control—to re-embed the market.

Ideational, critical and institutional scholarship has sought to push Polanyi’s insight about the double movement.34 Stretching his framework, authors have drawn attention to the ways in which Polanyi anticipated both institutional change and the embeddedness of norms. From different vantage points, their emphases on the impact of present-day neoliberal ideas on state–society–economy relations help to comprehend unfolding conditions, including the run-up to the Great Recession of 2008.35 In this instance it is difficult to gainsay or underestimate the links between knowledge and power.

In this respect Mark Blyth offers an important reading of Polanyi and makes the telling point that there is no reason why there cannot be more than only two movements—actions and reactions—on a global scale. Certainly there can be a triple or even more movements. But Blyth is quite mistaken to say that ‘Polanyi … thought that the double movement would end there [with the second phase]’.36 In a little known article that followed the publication of his landmark book The Great Transformation, Polanyi projected a third movement and a potential form of re-embedding.37 Before French foreign minister Robert Schuman proposed the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, and prior to the creation of other forerunners of the EU, Polanyi called for regionalism of a new order. Presciently he looked to what are now viewed as shifts in global governance in light of a series of interactions: that is, the embeddedness of institutions and ideas in social forces, their subsequent disembeddedness, and then a re-embedding in a regional setting. These swings remain historically contingent. And our era presents ever more complexity and new challenges to global ordering. At the time of writing, the unfolding Eurozone beckons improvisation in economic and political action, the form of which is yet to be determined.
Open questions

Surely *bricolage* is taking shape as a messy mosaic of global governance. This matrix includes many uncertainties. The institutional arrangements are rife with insecurities. Let us note four of them, albeit schematically.

First, do emerging market powers form cohesive groups? To what extent do they cooperate among themselves or increasingly compete in realms such as the production and supply of energy? As we have seen, when their own corporations go overseas to trade and invest, contentious issues arise over the terms and the corporations’ performance. The politics of these deals brings matters of control to the fore. The Niger Delta is a prime example. At a time when global demand is outstripping supply, the Delta offers other actors an opportunity to diversify from sources of oil in the Middle East. With strong economic growth in emerging market powers, Asian oil companies are emphasising the need for development cooperation. Indeed, Nigeria furnishes 50% of India’s oil, while 80% of Brazil’s imports from Africa are mineral products.\(^{38}\) Emerging market powers promise technology transfer as part of the transactions for construction, maintenance of pipelines, and increased refining capacity. Long touted in the United Nations, technological cooperation among developing countries, known in global governance circles as TCDC, has re-emerged as more than a lofty goal. It is a tangible aspect of the emerging material power phenomena. As local entrepreneurial classes and oil bureaucrats seize opportunities, countries like China and India vie with one another. Thus, in petro-states, the lines of oil power and political power become entangled and, at times, bound up with ethnic struggles over the proceeds of resources.

Second, insofar as emerging market powers bond, inclusion in, and exclusion from, membership groupings is a recurrent debate. Considering that both authoritarian and democratic countries of varying scale are members, what are the criteria for joining? Should Indonesia, Mexico and Turkey, among others, belong to BRICS, IBSA and BASIC? Why not enlarge the assemblages to, say, BRICSM (BRICS plus Mexico)?\(^{39}\) Establish a system of rotation? Or create a category of associate membership? And who should determine the size and shape of the table?

Third, what are the relations between the emerging market and the great powers? While modified, bilateral ties in the ambit of trade, investment and finance with the USA, the world’s largest national economy, remain a major factor in the global equation. What combination of accommodation and opposition on specific issues is appropriate? And how should power holders and intellectuals read the hawkish poles of thinking in their respective countries? Hard power calculations of national interests dovetail in a scenario that projects a gathering storm of international rivalries among the three major powers in Asia and the Pacific: the USA, China and India. Strategists in these countries play out this realist thinking.\(^{40}\)

Fourth, if military strategy is a key consideration, then, for emerging market powers, the challenge is to be proactive in other spheres as well. How to ascend in the global division of labour and power? How to exploit opportunities? Will these moves help to avoid implosion? The latter question points to domestic
elites’ relations with vulnerable strata: the unemployed, younger generations, marginalised women and poverty-stricken areas. Take China, with a GDP larger than that of all the other countries in the BRICS combined, and whose gross national income per capita of $3650 in 2009 compared to $7350 for Malaysia and $19 835 for the Republic of Korea. China’s manifold problems include marked inequalities between urban and rural populations and thus among its regions, demographic pressures, environmental problems and an increasing incidence of political unrest catalysed by information and communications technologies.

At home in emerging market powers not only feelings of pride in genuine accomplishments, but also misgivings, including about participation in the multilateral groupings, are evident. Why, for example, is energy-rich Russia a partner in Southern multilateralism? While oil and gas exports propel Russia’s economic growth, a major task remains sectoral diversification. Without far-reaching, domestic economic reforms, Russians are also troubled by the lack of skilled jobs, especially in the private sector, by mounting inequality and declining social mobility. In Brazil worries surround a constricted labour market and its slack educational system. A shortage of skilled workers pushes up wages and costs, thereby increasing household debt. And in India a globalist orientation comes with severe weaknesses in infrastructure, plus rates of literacy and access to education lower than China’s. The challenges are growing inequities in the distribution of wealth, dire environmental degradation exacerbated by the engines of economic growth, and social tensions surrounding shortages of water and other resources.

Meanwhile, is South Africa punching above its weight and serving as a gateway for a second scramble for Africa’s bounty? With a population of 49 million, a life expectancy on average of only 52 years and a poverty rate of 23%, in what sense is South Africa really in the same league as China, whose 1.3 billion people average 73 years of life and experience a poverty rate of 2.8%? This percentage, of course, must be considered in light not only of the absolute size of the population but also of the poverty marker. Using $2 per day as the threshold, 452 million Chinese people live under the poverty line. Even allowing for such considerations of scale, however, it is worth asking whether Pretoria is but a junior deputy in the BRICS, IBSA and BASIC coalitions that aim to reform international institutions and help others gain access to resources. And South Africa must come to terms with China’s policy of maintaining ‘normal relations’ with countries like Sudan and Zimbabwe. After a decades-long struggle for its citizens’ human rights, how does post-apartheid South Africa find common ground with the foreign policies of countries, including other emerging market powers, which adhere to dissimilar normative positions?

**Conclusion**

In sum, global *bricolage* is an analytical tool for exploring emerging market power. This conceptualisation draws attention to reconfigurations that confer meaning and relate cognitive to non-cognitive processes. In doing so, it requires further intellectual work on the foundational discourses that inform various
approaches to contemporary international studies. To wit: in his treatment of epistemology, methodology and social theory, Karl Popper cautioned about ‘utopian social engineering’ and advocated ‘piecemeal social engineering’. His thinking about an ‘open society’ had enormous influence on Friedrich von Hayek, whose colleagues and followers developed the neoliberal model of political economy and forged institutional innovations in governance. Beginning with President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, political authorities have summoned these ideas and sought to universalise them via global governance agencies.

To this day constructions of free-market mobility and self-regulation inform policy discourses on ‘partnerships’ in international development, absent underlying social forces, and on a ‘flat world’, apparently without entrenched interests in conflict with one another. Normatively cast as actors that seek mutual cooperation with others and try to optimise their market power in a competitive world lacking tight regulation, each country—a complex of state, market and society—must thus pursue its own advantage.

Bringing to mind knowledge production in this manner thereby also points to the existential phenomena of global bricolage, understood as a mix of disorderly processes and institutional reassemblages. Grounded in cultural political economy, this concept explores a cobbling together of multiple kinds of self-organisation in national blocs and only loosely meshed as a mode of informal global governance. Further, the bricolage approach offers a grammar, a way to examine the combination of spontaneity and international groupings without one-sidedly emphasising the former or the latter. It thus views this experimentation as glimmerings of potential modifications in ways to steer the global political economy.

As noted, new centres of power and wealth continue to materialise but evince pronounced weaknesses. Recalling that China and India may be considered as re-emerging, one might contemplate the possibilities for subsequent disruption or reversal of historical trajectories. In other words, the prognosis for emerging market powers is not unidirectional; it should not be mistaken for a post-historical future, as in Francis Fukuyama’s post-cold war scenario. Consider, then, whether the fortunes of emerging market powers could turn around, with dire setbacks ahead. Might rising market power slip into falling market power?

Once an emerging market power itself, the USA has patently come on hard times and is making painful readjustments in a changing global order. And in the 1970s and 1980s Japan could also have been regarded as an emerging market power. In the wake of World War II it recovered from destruction, developed advanced technology, and built the second largest national economy in the world. Thereafter some developing countries similarly climbed up the value-added tree from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive level, but Japan is exceptional in its leap to a technologically intensive echelon. Decades ago prominent scholars like Ezra Vogel even envisaged that Japan could become number one, overtaking the USA in certain sectors. Such exaggerated expectations were not uncommon and, although today’s forecasts are hardly uniform, Japan’s outlook is for more economic stagnation and retrenchment. It must cope with an aging population, a growing social welfare toll, intergenerational
resentment, an exodus of young talent, sovereign debt, plus repairs from a mega-natural disaster aggravated by gross human error. In 2011 a triple crisis of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident beset Japan. Historical contingency produced a calamity that has added massively to this country’s prior problems.

For emerging market powers the prospects seem considerably brighter. Nevertheless, forums such as BRICS, IBSA and BASIC mainly represent moves from above and have barely addressed marked inequalities in income and wealth, ecological imbalances or cultural exclusions at home. Clearly, their futures remain open-ended.

As argued, the bricoleurs are not master planners. They do not have templates. Like the authors of a constitution, multiple actors in different locales now and again provide scripts, often unexpectedly and with unanticipated consequences. Policy makers, grassroots activists and intellectuals—some of them one and the same—create and amend the global bricolage of emergent market power. The bricoleurs’ responses to the tensions of continuity and discontinuity, emancipatory vision and contested neoliberal norms, and regionalism and uneven development will bear greatly on the shape of global order in the coming decades.

Notes

This paper is based on my keynote addresses at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) workshop on ‘BRICS/IBSA–Africa Relations: Turning Threats into Opportunities’, Uppsala, 13–14 June 2011, and at the University of Sussex Centre for Global Economy’s conference on ‘Rising Powers and the Future of Global Governance’, Brighton, 16–17 May 2012. Special thanks to NAI former director of research, Fantu Cheru; and the Centre’s Kevin Gray. In what follows I am indebted to the participants in these sessions. I am also grateful to Nicholas T Smith for his stellar assistance.

1 In the 1990s Russia initiated a triangular framework with India and China—RIC. BRIC dates to 2001 (then, with the addition of South Africa, enlarged to BRICS in 2010); IBSA was formed as a tripartite dialogue forum and fund for assisting other developing countries in 2003; and BASIC, a group to negotiate a global agreement on climate change, in 2009.


3 Ibid.


5 V Shubin, comments at workshop on ‘BRICS/IBSA Relations: Turning Threats into Opportunities’, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 13–14 June 2011. The G8 countries are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the USA.


17 C Pinheiro, comments at workshop on ‘BRICS/IBSA Relations: Turning Threats into Opportunities’, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 13–14 June 2011.
18 See, for example, Patrick, The G20 and the United States.
25 Ibid.
26 Launched in 1999, the G20 adds Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey and the European Union to the G8 members.
30 M Qobo, programme head, Emerging Powers and Global Challenges, South African Institute of International Affairs, personal communication, Johannesburg, 27 March 2010.
36 Blyth, Great Transformations, p 4.
37 K Polanyi, ‘Universal capitalism or regional planning?’, London Quarterly of World Affairs, 10(3), 1945, pp 86–91. I am grateful to Björn Hettne for bringing this article to my attention.
38 C Obi, comments at workshop on ‘BRICS/IBSA Relations: Turning Threats into Opportunities’, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 13–14 June 2011.
42 Shubin, comments at workshop on ‘BRICS/IBSA Relations’.
43 Taneja, ‘The rise of China and India’
Notes on Contributor

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