

The BRICs and the UN: Coordination or Fragmentation?

Written by Sean Burges

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SEAN BURGES, OCT 21 2011

One of the subplots of the ongoing global financial crisis and aftermath of the Arab Spring has been what role the BRIC emerging market economies – Brazil, Russia, India, and China – might play in restoring not just global financial stability, but also in increasing international security and smoothing the operation of key institutions such as the United Nations. This in turn has prompted some to muse about the potential for a ‘BRIC bloc’ in institutions such as the United Nations, bringing a new coordinated policy approach to international decision-making.

The search for effective coordination in the UN and beyond continues without much success. Brazil floated a bevy of ideas for European financial rescue, all of which fell flat in the face of justifiable Chinese financial risk aversion and possibly more questionable European pride. On the security front Brazil has sought to tread an independent line, taking an approach to the Arab spring that has at times left it looking like it supports Middle Eastern despots in countries such as Iran, Libya and Syria. While this may have been a relief for China and Russia because it deflected attention away from their conflicted positions, to suggest that this was a sign of coordinated action amongst the BRICs is to push an inherently flawed argument too far. There are three reasons that consistent coordination amongst the BRICs in the UN is something that will be sought, but not found by policy makers and analysts in the North.

An initial problem relates to the genesis of the BRIC grouping. The acronym is a catchy term coined by the investment bank Goldman Sachs to lump together four countries that it felt offered potential as sites for profitable investment in the medium term. While the logic behind the Goldman Sachs paper that launched the BRICs may be economically sound, it explicitly does not include any consideration of such things as UN voting records (the basis for launching the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum known as IBSA), similarities in political structure, regional ambition, or approaches to issues such as global security and international development. Indeed, in some of these latter aspects the four BRIC countries could not be more different. On a political level they cover the full range from forms of totalitarianism through systems bordering on electoral authoritarianism to vibrant if not confusing liberal democracy. Similar distinctions come up with respect to human rights as well as the willingness of the country to directly intervene in neighbouring states or deal with ongoing regional conflicts. There is very little about the past behaviour and current policies of Brazil, Russia, India and China that suggests that they would coordinate action in the UN on anything but an ad hoc basis.

The second problem relates to entrenched systemic power within the UN system. Bluntly put, China and Russia have a veto and permanent seat on the Security Council while Brazil and India remain mere aspirants. This creates an enormous power asymmetry within the UN system. While Brazil and India have demonstrated a capability to organize other countries behind their respective positions, it is a stretch to say that Brazilian or Indian acquiescence is necessary to get things done within the UN. A dissenting Brazilian or Indian to an UNSC motion can be ignored, as proved the case most recently with Brazilian concerns on motions relating to Iran and nuclear processing as well as internal unrest in Syria. Conversely, veto-wielding China and Russia do not need the support of Brazil or India to block an initiative within the UN. Indeed, the two veto-possessing BRICs likely do not want to see an expansion of permanent UNSC voices that might diminish their influence. To make things even more complicated, China and India retain a number of serious mutual security concerns that date back to border conflicts in the 1960s, while Russia's relations with China might best be characterized as cautious.

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This brings us to the third problem with the idea of BRIC coordination within the UN, namely a demonstrated appetite and aptitude for leadership, let alone acceptance of this leadership on at least a regional level. In the case of India the situation is complicated by ongoing tensions with Pakistan and a sense throughout the rest of the region that Delhi might not be taking an altruistic view to the advancement of regional order. Brazil's place as a natural regional leader is largely rejected by its South American neighbours and flatly discarded by Mexico. More to the point, Brazil has yet to demonstrate a willingness to provide the fungible leadership goods that would bring acceptance of it as a global voice for South America. On a global level all four of the BRIC countries have consistently shown that they will privilege their own interests over those of the global good, most notably by taking a strict approach to sovereignty that precludes any sort of proactive intervention to prevent humanitarian tragedy. While recent pressures from China on Syria suggest this line might be bending a little in Beijing, Brazil is assiduously sticking to this line while Russia's neighbours might well wish that Moscow took a similar position. In terms of coordination the problem is that all four countries are remaining tightly focused on a short-term approach to vouchsafing their interests, which prevents the sort of longer-term games that lead to careful and consistent coordination. Of course, the overriding issue is that none of the four countries have a shared vision of what should be the project of the global leader, be it a single country or a neat stack of BRICs.

Perhaps the only sense where the BRICs might be coordinating their activities is in the use of the 'grouping' as a distraction that screens attention from their individual prerogatives. After all, it took almost four years for the BRIC foreign ministers to get around to having a 'summit' meeting, and even when the presidents finally got together Lula's effusiveness was not matched by his counterparts. Today the leaders talk, but rarely take combined action or push for substantive joint strategies, pointing to the possibility that at least in political terms the BRICs made by Goldman Sachs may prove to be more like stumbling blocks than the foundation stones needed to reinvigorate the UN or reshape the international system.

Sean Burges is a Lecturer in International Relations and Senior Associate in the Australian National Centre for Latin American Studies at the Australian National University. He is author of *Brazilian Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (University Press of Florida, 2009), over a dozen academic articles and book chapters on Brazil and inter-American affairs, and numerous analytical and opinion pieces in major newspapers and specialist publications.