

BOOK REVIEW NOTES

BRICS GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES*

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In 2001, the world began talking about the BRICs – Brazil, Russia, India and China – as a potential powerhouse of the world economy. Today, the BRICS (South Africa became a member of the bloc in 2010) and their activities are one of the most discussed issues in global economics and international politics. The acronym “BRICs” was initially formulated in 2001 by economist Jim O’Neill, of Goldman Sachs, in a report on growth prospects for the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China – which together represented a significant share of the world’s production and population. There are two opposite views on the BRICS bloc nowadays – from regarding the countries as the rapidly emerging economies and political powers that will be the “strategic pillars” of a renewed international system by 2050 to denying the BRICS have any real potential to become a true driver in the global arena.

In *Do the BRICS Still Matter?* Marcos Degaut, a political adviser at the Brazilian House of Representatives and former intelligence officer at the Brazilian Intelligence Agency, who holds a master’s degree in international relations and a bachelor’s degree in international law from the University of Brasilia, brings in-depth analysis and profound study to address the background and future of the BRICS, focusing on the countries’ social, political, economic and cultural characteristics. The book provides the reader with a penetrating discussion of the BRICS countries’ common

* Reviewed book: Marcos Degaut, *Do the BRICS Still Matter?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015).

features and differences, strategic culture and foreign policy, and comes to the conclusion that the BRICS are not likely to deliver a new international system due to a number of evident disparities.

The goal of Degaut's study is to contribute a critical reasoning of the BRICS's strengths and weaknesses, to examine some of the bloc's constructive dimensions, with the core point referring to the political and economic relations among its members and to prove that existing cooperative actions are not efficient as to lead to a significant change in world power distribution.

It is Degaut's strong belief that the BRICS group remains primarily rhetorical, not concrete, and lacks palpable achievements leading to its survival and dominance in the global arena, though this statement may be quite controversial, taking into the account the real achievements of the BRICS group that can be traced in recent years.

The introductory section of the book offers an analysis of the term "BRICS" and a description of the initial steps in economic performance and the political sphere the BRICS countries took to become known worldwide. The concept of "BRICS" is thoroughly unveiled via a summary of O'Neil's and other researchers' ideas on the BRICS bloc and its economic development. To render his observations more illustrative, the author supplies data in a table showing G7 and BRICS economic results, namely GDP annual growth rates in 2003–2008. The BRICS figures are impressive when compared to the weak economic performance of G7 nations, proving that the BRICS countries have a "remarkable opportunity to coordinate their economic policies and diplomatic strategy not only to enhance their position as a grouping in the international economic and financial system, but also to be a stabilization factor in the world economy as a whole." However, the author argues that in the years that followed the BRICS group has made little progress toward building collective identity, creating an institutional apparatus and, it can be added, proposing meaningful legal mechanisms aimed at regulating specific activities and target actions to achieve set goals.

Moving forward, in his first section the author examines some of the common features shared by the BRICS as well as some of their differences. The research explicates relative deficiencies and strengths of the countries and demonstrates to what extent these characteristics may affect their mutual relations with the world. The second section is an analysis of the reasons for and outcomes of the BRICS cooperation models. The third section explains the author's reasoning on the BRICS countries' strategic cultures and foreign policies. The author presents his ideas on each country's individual motivation for joining the BRICS and assumptions they might have on being a part of the BRICS bloc. The third section demonstrates an interesting and original approach which, *inter alia*, seems the most open to discussion.

Referring to the similarities of the BRICS countries, the author draws the reader's attention, first, to their size and population, expanding domestic markets and huge

labour resources which are mostly unused. His second outcome in this section is that all five countries have exhibited impressive economic growth in recent years. The third feature the countries have in common is the important role they play in their respective regions. And, lastly, according to the author and other researchers, they “are all undergoing a military modernization effort aimed at preserving their strategic interests.” In the same section the negative common characteristics are pulled together, including corruption problems, high rates of illiteracy and poverty, inequalities in regional economic income, dependence on commodities exports and foreign investment, and relatively small openness to the global economy. The author considers these characteristics to be the main barrier to effective collective action and global dominance.

BRICS cooperation is the focus of the author’s attention in the next section. It is true that the BRICS have become a platform for dialogue and cooperation not only in economic, financial and development sectors, but also in the political sphere. This section explains in more detail that the BRICS members have presented a convergence of interests on a number of important issues – support for a multilateral trading system, conservative attitudes on sovereignty and opposition to the use of military power, among others. To depict the cooperation mechanisms more distinctively, the author underlines the milestones in the process, describing the most meaningful BRICS summits and noteworthy results. The mentioned initiatives have proved to be effective attempts to exhibit coordination and to set up the agenda for global economic and political governance of the BRICS as a group. However, it would be fair to say that some areas of cooperation remain outside the scope of the research and not highlighted in the book. Just a few examples would include the energy and energy efficiency field, food security and information security, socially vital areas such as international humanitarian assistance and the reduction of natural disaster risks, all of which are constantly in the focus of the BRICS countries’ discussions and joint efforts. In addition, in the second section the author criticizes the BRICS joint action on the issues of climate change, future military alliance and strategy at the World Trade Organization which, according to the author, proves the lack of common ground and inability to act as a bloc. As illustrated in other editions, the BRICS nations have undertaken very different role behaviours within climate change governance. In fact, the different perspectives on climate change were apparent before the Kyoto Protocol ending, but since 2012, when a new global agreement was needed to curb emissions, the BRICS countries have taken up voluntary emission reduction targets. In recent years, all BRICS nations have adopted climate change strategies in which they outline the steps to achieve emission reduction goals. This demonstrates that cooperation among the countries in the climate sector is on the rise and on certain issues the BRICS are capable of serving as a useful platform.

In the last section, which is mostly of an analytical nature, the author describes the strategic cultures of the BRICS countries, and their individual political and ideological

preferences with the focus on how the cultural peculiarities may influence each country's position in the BRICS bloc as well as in the global arena.

In this section, China is presented as an apparently paradoxical "dualistic" strategic culture based at the same time on conflict-averse and defensive-minded Confucian-Mencian principles and on current political doctrines which encourage military solutions and nationalism. The author's assumption as to China's reasons for participating in the BRICS is that, "consistent with the principles of peaceful development and international engagement, it can use the group to reduce the impression it is seeking a superpower role in world affairs by emphasizing multilateralism and its status as a developing nation." Having got enough political and economic weight in the globalizing world, China might become rather hesitant to acquiesce to the common interests and priorities of its BRICS partners.

Two basic characteristics of the Brazilian strategic culture, according to the author, are that the country sees itself as a peaceful nation and believes it is destined for greatness. Brazil's top priority is to raise its profile on the international stage in order to have a greater voice in global affairs, and this is the reason for the country's active participation in different international organizations (WTO, IMF, World Bank), the BRICS included. As stated in the book, Brazil sees its BRICS affiliation as a passport to global leadership.

The author's view on Russian strategic culture is that the country tends to use force to achieve its strategic objectives. Another driving force behind Russian foreign policy is its rapid economic growth. "Russian leaderships have fostered democratic values such as freedom of political expression, political pluralism, freedom of speech, and the due process of law, and also have constantly manifested goals of becoming a more significant actor in the international arena." On the other hand, the author underlines that the main elements of Russia's strategic culture are combativeness, competitiveness, political assertiveness and geopolitical ambitions. In the author's opinion, Russia values the BRICS as a pathway to a multipolar world and as a platform to advance the country's geostrategic interests.

The bottom line of Indian foreign policy is a quest for strategic autonomy. The country shows a pragmatic outlook to international relations even while it strongly supports the global trade system, international organizations, and international law and principles. The author summarizes, however, that India "not only lacks the strategic weight required to shape global affairs, but to some extent, it also seems not to have a culture of strategic planning." By joining the BRICS, India may search for some useful instruments to obtain international support and respect.

With the incorporation of South Africa into the "BRICS," the bloc gained more weight, representativeness and legitimacy, as the group has become more credible with regard to protecting the interests of developing nations. For South Africa itself membership in the BRICS has assisted in enhancing its continental leadership in Africa.

In the concluding section, Degaut asserts that the BRICS have become a relevant power on the international stage through economic and political cooperation and by taking important measures to tackle global issues. However, Degaut is convinced that the BRICS countries' efforts and measures are limited in their depth, scope and acceptance, and, as a whole, the group lacks cohesion, resources, common priorities and capacity to shape their own global agenda.

Though much of Degaut's reasoning and conclusions seems to be disputable, the volume should be of real interest to scholars, policymakers and even students engaged in BRICS studies or activities. Degaut provides concise and profound analysis of the BRICS countries' political background and aspirations as well as theoretical explanations and practical examples of what the BRICS countries' perspective is vis-à-vis the global community.

It becomes clear then that today the BRICS are capable of serving as a platform for international cooperation and meaningful action, provided the group can achieve convergence among its members (even with their different priorities and approaches) and, moreover, prepare and present sufficient legal mechanisms which will support the weight of the entire group on the international stage and help in adopting concrete measures for their common agenda.

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