

# To What Extent Does History Determine the Foreign Policies Of the BRICS?

Written by Charlotte Lecomte

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CHARLOTTE LECOMTE, DEC 13 2013

### Introduction

The last twenty years have seen the emergence of new and powerful economies in world politics known as the 'BRICS'. As stated by Condoleezza Rice, "in the twenty-first century, emerging nations like India, China, Brazil, [...] and South Africa are increasingly shaping the course of history" (Hurrell, 2008; 51). With the addition of Russia, the BRICS essentially constitute growing economic powers that could, in the future, overcome that of the US, and they thus have the potential to counter-balance its perceived unilateralism in the international system. The BRICS offer new opportunities in the global economic market for trade and development, and have increasingly sought to bring diplomatic influence to the international political stage.

Given their different insights on world politics, it is interesting to study the BRICS's foreign policy formulations as a balance between different factors, with the most prominent being the state's history and its economic interests. A state is typically shaped by its weathering of historical events and the lessons learnt from them. In the case of the BRICS, there is no denying the fact that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of a bipolar world order had an effect on how the BRICS were to progress in their decision-making. Each state's own historical traumas formulate part of its identity, as did, for instance, the damages of apartheid for South Africa. Yet, the degrees to which such events really affect policy-making depend on the states' respective roles in the appropriate international issues.

This essay will closely study the extent of the impact of such ground-breaking historical conditions on the foreign policy-making of South Africa, Brazil, and Russia. Post-Cold War Russia had the significant challenge of gaining international respect after nearly half a century of Soviet- American ideological tensions. South Africa's post-apartheid conditions were the cause for many of its internal problems, making it difficult to gain worldwide recognition as a leading African state. Brazil, on the other hand, seems to have been largely exempt from international pressures during the Cold War era; hence, its foreign policy may have followed its primarily pragmatic national interests rather than its historical identity. It is also interesting to notice, through these three states, how regional and/or continental differences between the BRICS affect their respective foreign policy reactions to history.

The essay will start by contemplating the true role of historical identities in foreign policy-making, focusing on the BRICS's common goals of recognition and redistribution as put forward by Nel (2010), before considering how each state's foreign policy decisions can be accounted for by its respective past and historical legacies. Next, the essay will develop how other policy factors – such as the concern for regional stability, economic development, and relations with the USA – at times overcome historical legacies, giving foreign policy formulation a more pragmatic aspect. Finally, the essay will conclude that, despite there being a fine line between historical and economic influence in decision-making, the BRICS's overarching regard for multilateralism seems to be gradually coming from a purely pragmatic interest stance. Therefore, history seems to be taking a gradually less important role.

### Part I: Historical Identity in Foreign Policy Making

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At the base of the BRICS's foreign policy-making is the fundamental question of what the BRICS expect to achieve from the global scene. According to Stephen Krasner (Nel, 2010; 951), all states want to maximize their power and augment their wealth. For this, the BRICS states have two absolute goals: redistribution of power along multilateral lines and recognition of international standing. Through recognition – the case where they are seen as respected and esteemed members of international society – states gain full and equal membership in general multilateral institutions, as well as acknowledgment for specific developmental needs of developing countries. The process of colonization was a source of blatant disrespect for indigenous cultures and norms, especially in Brazil and South Africa, and the creation of the UN only furthered that disrespect in the sense that states belonging to the so-called 'Third World' were excluded from being considered for rotational non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council. This mainly drove South Africa's and Brazil's commitments to promoting equitable multilateralism in the aim of gaining esteem. For instance, Brazil's involvement in multilateral institutions since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – such as the League of Nations and the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 – identifies the state as a mediator between great powers and smaller nations (Nel, 2010; 967). As for redistribution, the BRICS seek a restructuring of power, wealth and prestige; this means a fairer distribution of benefits of trade and the removal of non-tariff obstacles obstructing access to global markets. South Africa's history of isolation and self-imposed exclusion due to apartheid has made it want to fully re-integrate the world economy as a post-apartheid opportunity. Overall, one can see very clearly how these two fundamental goals can be driven by historical legacies and scars that want to be erased; history drives change.

In order to understand the foundations of contemporary Russian foreign policy, one must backtrack and consider the last few years of the Soviet Union. The international system was transformed by the rapid succession of mostly non-violent revolutions that resulted in the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the Warsaw Pact, the two major opponents to the USA and NATO. Provoked by Gorbachev's renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine, the Warsaw Pact was transformed into an alliance much like that of the European state system, and the practice of diplomacy changed (Koslowski, Kratochwil, 1994; 239). Because of the subsequent de-legitimization of Soviet Communism and imperialism, Russia now had changed political capabilities; none as powerful as that it had held during its superpower years. Usually, in the on-going confusion of ideas of who should formulate foreign policy behaviour, some nationalist characteristic could be found. Throughout the 1990s, Russia considered cooperation with Western-dominated international institutions to alleviate the growing disappointment from post-Soviet states and from the failures in Chechnya. The turning point for Russia's trust and reliance on the USA was the war in Kosovo in 1998, where confidence in Western institutions and policies were destroyed. From then on, Russia assumed a more assertive and independent foreign policy, in producing regional and global multilateral solutions aimed at the creation of alternative centres of power (Makarychev, Morozov, 2011; 354). As of 2000, Russia's Foreign Policy Doctrine then followed that "Russia shall seek to achieve a multi-polar system of international relations that really reflects the diversity of the modern world with its great variety of interests" (Makarychev, Morozov, 2011; 355). This shows how Russia has gone from a desire to participate in US-led organizations to a more reserved, multilateral stance. This, however, does not mean that Russian foreign policy was wholly anti-Western. It still continues to ally with the EU and the US, but only where it is in its national interest. For instance, Russia blocked US bid for intervention in Iraq in 2003 at the UN Security Council.

South Africa's post-apartheid policy experience was somewhat unique in the historical events of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the system promoted growth and development and was facilitated by high levels of political repression (Lodge, 1996; 188), problems concerning a skills shortage and a limited domestic market brought on a severe economic recession which provoked localized communal rebellions, guerrilla insurgency, and finally, a push towards democratization in 1989. Incentives for change, such as the Sharpeville massacre or the brutal repression of Soweto schoolchildren in 1976, were driven by the 'Africanist' view that apartheid was seen as a species of settler colonialism, reversing the denial of the rights of the indigenous population was a priority for all Africanists (Guelke, 1999; 9). Apartheid then had a prominent legacy in post-apartheid South African society, notably as one of the main causes of poverty and growing unemployment. The main challenge for the new democratic government was to address social injustice and promote economic growth while maintaining effective state authority. In this, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was one of the institutions that had to be reconstructed. During apartheid, its main aim was to ward off diplomatic sanctions and isolation, whereas in a post-apartheid state, it had to issue policies emphasizing human rights, development, and multilateralism in the ultimate goal of promoting South Africa

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as the leader of the African continent (Alden, Le Pere, 2004; 285). Furthermore, civil society moved from being the precursor of the anti-apartheid struggle to re-orienting its focus and association with the new government, promoting the norms and values enshrined in its democratic constitution. On the eve of his election, Mandela claimed that "Human rights will be the light that guides our foreign policy" (Alden, Le Pere, 2004; 284), again showing how South Africa's post-apartheid policy was to promote human rights and democratisation as way of erasing the negative apartheid legacy. In this, South Africa's dramatic post-apartheid rehabilitation continues to influence the shape and conduct of foreign policy through its formulation of post-apartheid objectives.

As for Brazil, its foreign policy was challenged by the same post-Cold War trial that many other countries faced: that of deciphering how existing levels of autonomy and sovereignty could be maintained. The end of the bipolar world order and the acceleration of globalization meant there was a crucial need for Brazil to avoid isolation from a unilateral Americanized system. For this, the appropriate strategy to follow was regionalism (Burgess, 2008; 75). The Brazilian goal towards regional hegemony was based on a collective project embracing participating states towards a shared goal: this turned into the creation of Mercosur, the South American Economic trading bloc, and IIRSA (Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America). Thus, the end of the Cold War did have an effect on Brazilian foreign policy making. Brazil's own internal historical conditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also influenced how its policies were to be made, from the country's independence to revolution in the 1930s to the New Republic in 1985. In the 1960s, Brazilian politics became dangerously polarized in the contexts of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution, and a growing mobilization of peasants; making it an overall precarious environment for democracy (Montero, 2005; 18). This is what partly led to bureaucratic-authoritarian regime of 1964-1985, the end of which promised Brazilians a host of civil, political and social rights that the Brazilian population never thought they would have. According to Montero (2005; 26), "what happens in world politics and in the global economy has a direct effect on domestic politics". This means that all political and economic transformations leading up to the transition to democracy were each catalysed by events in other countries and the global economy. This shows that Brazil is not so different to Russia or South Africa: historical conditions may have had a less direct influence on foreign policy-making but there is still an influence nonetheless.

## **Part II: Other Factors in Foreign Policy Making**

There are, however, counterarguments that prove that historical identities are occupying a decreasingly important role in decision making. For one, Nel (2010; 952) claims that the current generation of BRICS leaders are more integrationist than their predecessors, in the sense that they have more confidence in their ability to have effect on redistribution of wealth, prestige, and power in the global political economy. This redistribution is currently directed to draw from great powers like the USA. Thus, a global structural transformation expected by the sting of historical legacies is not necessarily on the agenda of the current leadership of these states. This is because other factors have gained more significance in decision making processes; increasingly so since the turn of the century and the consequences of the 9/11 attacks on the international system. Furthermore, some of the BRICS's goals, such as that of redistribution, may not be fully explained by historical conditions.

For one, redistribution has taken a new meaning for the BRICS as the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses. Today, it is not so much aimed to regain what was denied to them in colonial and immediate post-colonial times, but rather as a strategy to balance the new world order in the hope of achieving a multipolar system. This means they are focusing less on the past and more on the future of the global structure, and comes as a direct response to the USA's unilateral actions, namely the illegitimate intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the several other hit-and-miss US-led operations under the Bush administration. Such US policies have seriously undermined the BRICS's trust in the American superpower. As Putin stated in 2007, the "unilateral, illegitimate actions" of the US and its allies are detrimental to global security, as they produce new conflicts and wars (Makarychev, Morozov, 2011; 356). The foreign policies of the BRICS could be seen as having adopted a more constructivist stance: policy choices must be meaningful in terms of the state's preferences (Koslowski, Kratochwil, 1994; 225). In this, the efforts towards building a multilateral society of states can perhaps be better explained by the prospect of future economic and diplomatic conditions rather than nursing the mistakes of the past. Russia's concern for international democracy is greatly driven by the desire to counterbalance the West while staying in Western favour; the EU-Russia Partnership constitutes a strategy of preventing Russia balancing the West through aligning with non-Western governments (Makarychev, Morozov,

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2011; 365). In the case of South Africa, a multilateral world allows for the pooling of resources, the sharing of information and the lowering of costs; South African officials see in multilateralism a possibility to challenge the hegemonic order (Jordaan, 2010; 85). As for Brazil, distributional justice would help alleviate the costs inflicted by the negative effects of globalization and its resulting instabilities and inequalities. Therefore, foreign policies, in terms of goals of redistribution, can in this sense be more attributed to the new 21<sup>st</sup> century outlook on the globalized economy: in this day and age historical conditions and its lessons can perhaps no longer be applied to decision making.

Another major foreign policy determinant comes from the BRICS's regional contexts and the changing patterns of regional insecurity, which can be the source of the sheer difficulties of maintaining influence. Russia, for instance, failed to secure state control after its defeat in Chechnya, denouncing its increasing incapacity to maintain internal sovereignty (Hurrell, 2006; 9). South Africa's bid to be known as the leading state of the African continent is only possible through the support from its African neighbours. For this it must adopt the norm that African leaders should remain united, no matter the nature of their regime, and not criticize each other. This sense of African solidarity is what buys the South African leadership credibility, deepening ties with Africa and the rest of the developing world; hence stabilizing the region (Jordaan, 2010; 84). Greater involvement by South Africa in regional trade, sectorial co-operation projects and joint development of regional resources and infrastructure could prove salutary for efforts to promote growth and development in both South Africa and the region. This African unity also encourages the African identity as being black instead of appearing as a lackey to Western arrogance – as a result this same solidarity has undermined African leaders' ability to recognize home-grown causes of African problems and accept legitimate criticism from the West. Brazil's regionalist projects further constitute an effort to build solidarity between developing states, improving South-South diplomacy. The Brazilian state needs this form of partnership to alleviate its vulnerability to incomplete development and internal inequalities, as, in forming regional coalitions, it can then increase its bargaining power with southern nations as well as northern states. This, again, would "increase, if only by a margin, the degree of multipolarity in the world" (Hurrell, 2008; 52). In this regional stability has gained more and more influence in policy-making in recent years, always in the aim of building a multilateral system.

To build this multipolar order correctly and with as few tensions as possible, the BRICS's relations with the USA are also key to contemporary decision-making, as the concentration of power in an around the US is central in shaping systemic views and the options available to the BRICS. At this point, they are faced with either band-wagoning with the US political system or seeking a more pragmatic accommodation with the American political and economic structure (Hurrell, 2006; 12). For one, Brazilian policy post-1945 towards the US was not one identified as a close relationship; on the contrary, there were real clashes between the two states over economic and trade issues. Recently, there has been a more prudent coexistence and collaboration between Washington and Brasilia, despite the overarching Brazilian view that the US could prove to be an obstacle to Brazil's progress (Hurrell, 2008; 56).

It is important to point out that, given this analysis, it becomes apparent that there is a very fine line between how foreign policy is shaped by history or the future of economic diplomacy. The dramatic South African post-apartheid rehabilitation continues to influence the shape and conduct of foreign policy through the formulation of post-apartheid objectives. Yet, according to Marais (in Alden and Le Pere, 2004; 286) "many of the assumptions and affinities inherited from the anti-apartheid struggle have translated poorly into the new context". Indeed, South Africa's post-apartheid liberal foreign policy under Mandela has seen to be shifting to a liberationist one under Mbeki: Mandela's initial commitment to democracy was undermined by Mbeki's regard for regional political stability in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Mandela's pledge to protect human rights also took a turn as Mbeki's leadership voted against the UN Resolution condemning human rights abuses in Burma (Jordaan, 2010; 87). This shows that, as times have progressed, South Africa has abandoned the lessons from its apartheid history to formulate a new foreign policy. Brazil's assertive regional leadership under Lula kept focusing on anti-poverty initiatives and projects to restore economic ties with neighbouring states (Hurrell, 2008; 55); the historical conditions inflicted by the Cold War did not necessarily have much effect on Brazil's foreign policy, as it aligned itself with other developing countries under the Non-Aligned Movement as part of an effort not to be subsumed into one or the other superpower camps.

## Conclusion

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To conclude, the extent of which historical conditions determine the foreign policies of the BRICS remains contested and ambiguous. In today's globalized world, the BRICS states are undeniably concerned with creating a multipolar world, thus fully promoting multilateralism. This predominant foreign policy can be explained two ways: on the one hand, it stems from the desire to overcome the USA's post-Cold War unipolar position in the international system. By gaining more diplomatic power, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, as well as India and China, though exempt from this study, can restore the world order to a fairer and more balanced one to put an end to American diplomatic dominance in international institutions. On the other hand, multilateralism is often driven by purely national economic and regional interests and promotes a more equitable plight for developing states than westernized globalization. This consequently helps the BRICS gain independence from Western influence.

This essay argues that the relationship between economics and history is ambiguous because it is difficult to identify which has the most influence on the other: does history influence how foreign economic policies should be carried out, or is it the outcome of those policies that shape history? This is the fundamental question to elucidate when studying the BRICS and what influences their diplomatic rise to power. Studying Brazil, South Africa and Russia as case studies provides a balanced analysis: Russia seems to have its foreign policy more deeply rooted in history because of the impact of the collapse of Communism, a regime that had lived in the Russian mind-set since the Bolshevik revolution; South Africa learned its lessons from its post-apartheid experience; whereas Brazil seems to have been exempt from any ground-breaking international historical event. This constitutes a suitable counter-argument to the study, showing that none of the BRICS have had similar historical experiences and therefore, it would be best to unpack the question by individual state. Nonetheless, it appears that as time progresses, the BRICS are gradually leaving their historical legacies behind when dealing with decision making, and rather looking to the future prospects of global economic foreign policy.

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