

Why BRICS Matters

Written by Oliver Stuenkel

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OLIVER STUENKEL, MAR 28 2012

On Thursday the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) will gather in New Delhi for the 4th annual BRICS Summit. The meeting will cover a wide-range of issues including trade, investment, the global economy, international security, agriculture, innovation, energy security and global governance reform. Yet rather than debating what the content of the summit declaration will be, many analysts debate whether the BRICS grouping should even exist in the first place. Most European and U.S. commentators argue the five member nations' national interests diverge too greatly for the group to agree on anything. They have every reason to worry: If the BRICS were able to articulate a common position on virtually any global issue they would immediately be a global agenda-setter, with the capacity to seriously challenge the established powers' control over the global discourse.

It is true that the major challenge for BRICS has always been, and continues to be, the articulation of a common vision. Without the ability to find a common denominator, there is little reason to organize yearly summits to debate global issues. From the very beginning, critics of the BRICS outfit have argued that such a vision was an impossible dream.

Yet most observers overlook the great progress BRICS has already made since its first meeting in Russia in 2009. Each year, the BRICS summits have become more productive even as the scope of issues discussed has continuously expanded. Last year's summit in Sanya (China) was remarkable because South Africa's inclusion turned out to be a success, further bolstering the BRICS' global legitimacy. In addition, China and Russia came close to supporting India and Brazil's bid for permanent membership on the UN Security Council, a position that had been unthinkable a short time ago.

Furthermore, the upcoming summit's agenda indicates the BRICS members are slowly beginning to institutionalize their ties. Aside from a BRICS development bank, a common stock exchange, the elimination of investment barriers and cooperation on maritime security, the BRICS members will seek to build a common regulatory framework to boost intra-BRICS trade. While China has strong ties to the other four members, trade between the latter is extremely low with great potential for growth. In addition, specific steps will be taken at this week's summit to increase civil society ties, which also remain weak. Common platforms for research institutes and NGOs will create more opportunities to exchange best practices on common challenges such as inequality, pollution, poverty reduction, universal health care and education.

This is not to say there aren't differences between the five-member nations, of course. For instance, while Brazil, India and South Africa are pushing for a significant redistribution of power in global institutions, China and Russia are status-quo powers that are reluctant to change a system that has served them so well the past few decades. Similarly, whereas India, Brazil, and South Africa all abstained from the U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria, and thus were allowing the Western powers to approve it, Russia and China vetoed it. Some analysts seize upon these disparities to question the utility of the BRICS grouping.

This ignores the fundamental reality that internal differences create friction in all interstate groupings. Indeed, even long-standing highly-institutionalized alliances like NATO aren't impervious to this phenomenon: France and the United States, for instance, have clashed over everything from German rearmament and an independent French nuclear capability to the 2003 Iraq War. Furthermore, even when Washington and Paris were in agreement on

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intervening militarily in Libya, Germany abstained from the U.N. Security Council vote authorizing the use of force and refused to directly contribute to the subsequent military operation. This certainly doesn't mean that NATO has no future. Similarly, while Italy opposes India's bid for a permanent seat at the U.N. Security Council, Britain supports it. Nobody questions the European Union's existence because of this disagreement. Indeed, commentators would have a difficult time naming a single alliance or interstate grouping that always agrees on anything.

Many observers also err in viewing the BRICS as a potential alliance intent on upending the prevailing global order. Once again, the truth is more complex. Rather than turning into a "NATO of the South" or a European Union – type grouping, BRICS is perhaps more interested in less rigid models like those of the G-7 or the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OECD). At the same time, given its unique history and geographic characteristics, BRICS will have to chart its own path. When I recently participated in a BRICS track II-meeting in New Delhi as part of the Brazilian delegation, I was amazed by the delegates' willingness to debate innovative ideas, think outside the box and challenge the conventional wisdom on a multitude of global issues.

Internal differences in some areas do not reduce the utility of the BRICS concept as a whole. Quite to the contrary, different points of views, a commitment to free debate and a willingness to learn from each other are key reasons why BRICS's continued existence makes a great deal of sense. Even as the world becomes increasingly multipolar, the global debate remains dangerously one-sided and centered on Western points of view. This not only negatively impacts the emerging powers but equally affects the established powers which are unable to properly engage rising actors and convince them to assume greater responsibility. The yearly BRICS summits are thus an important step in the transition to multipolarity, as well as a useful debate on how to best solve humanity's most pressing challenges.

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