

Scenarios for BRICS Evolution in Light of the India–China Conflict

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Abstract

What is the future of the BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) group? BRICS has transformed in record time from a global non-entity into an informal institution that pursues global policy leadership, features extensive policy coordination among five powerful countries, and creates its own organizations. While BRICS momentum seemed unstoppable, a militarized dispute between India and China in 2020 raised questions about the group's future. This contribution concludes the Special Section by arguing that the BRICS group is not broken. Instead, it faces a range of strategic, geopolitical and operational challenges: how it addresses them will define its future trajectory and its impact on global governance. This essay analyses the situation from a conflict resolution perspective while bringing together insights from the five BRICS countries. It conceptualizes new directions for the BRICS group. Two possible internal conflict management scenarios are outlined: circumventing conflict and making institutional adjustments. Yet the real test of the group's resilience is its ability to exert collective leadership and improve global governance. BRICS' response to COVID-19 and to the challenge of sustainable development offers insights into the group's ability to advance community goals.

1. BRICS, interrupted? The future of an unlikely global governance start-up

Will India–China conflict make or break BRICS? Over the past decade, the BRICS group has been the prime example of global policy entrepreneurship. In contemporary global governance, proliferation of informal institutions is the new *modus operandi*, but only some institutions gain robustness and evolve over time. Ever since the BRIC group was formally launched in 2009 (South Africa joined in 2010), India and China's protracted rivalry has been frequently flagged as the very reason why the group would fail. Yet BRICS clearly 'made it' as a global governance start-up: the group has well-established summitry, extensive functional collaborations, and has delegated authority to the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). However, achieving the group's original goals such as advancing the reform of international financial institutions, cooperating on jointly relevant policy issues, and working toward a more democratic and just multi-polar world order requires long-term mobilization and commitment (BRIC, 2009).

India–China conflict is not the BRICS group's first roadblock. The group's internal collaboration difficulties have been highly visible in its eagerness to diversify the executive heads of international financial institutions and then failing to do so. Similarly, many proposed BRICS projects such as establishing a BRICS undersea cable, a BRICS credit rating agency, or a free trade agreement never materialized.

Nonetheless, BRICS organizations now appoint their own executive heads from the BRICS countries, and the group diverted to areas where it can act together. This India–China crisis has particularly high stakes because this relationship is central to BRICS cooperation. Its deterioration not only affects cooperation on a single issue or initiative, but it has major implications on trust and socialization within the group. It also impacts BRICS' evolution as a symbol of multi-polar consensus building and action.

As essays in this Special Section argue, not even the 2020 Galwan valley clash between India and China leading to casualties on both sides after almost 45 years, can dramatically undermine BRICS. Nonetheless, this crisis illuminates a range of strategic, geopolitical, and operational challenges that the group is facing and opens up new directions for its evolution. This contribution conceptualizes several possible scenarios for the group's future trajectory and argues that the group can thrive only if it focuses on inclusion and innovation in global governance.

Future scenarios can be thought of in two main ways. First, one needs to examine how BRICS handles the conflict itself, and second, how BRICS positions itself in global governance in light of the conflict. In terms of conflict management, BRICS can assume a business-as-usual or an institutional adjustment scenario. Regarding its role in global governance, BRICS needs to rethink how to exert collective leadership to better address contemporary policy challenges, including COVID-19 and sustainable development.

2. BRICS' approach to conflict management

BRICS' traditional response to an internal bilateral conflict is to ignore it and emphasize multilateral cooperation for which BRICS was established. Since BRICS is an institution, we can assume some institutional path dependence and the continuation of business-as-usual practices unless there is a major disruption. A high level of violence, for example, could lead to radical institutional change in the way BRICS manages internal conflict (see also Krasner, 1984). However, if we think about BRICS as a continuously evolving entity, its members can use this crisis to act on 'openings' provided by the shifting contextual positions to enhance their own positions (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). From this perspective, the BRICS members' initial informal agreement about their internal conflict management practices is neither final nor static (see also Spector and Zartman, 2003). It simply represents a prior stage of negotiation among institutional members on managing their affairs, and institutional adjustments are possible in light of new implementation challenges. Both scenarios comprise various opportunities and threats.

2.1. Business-as-usual or circumventing conflict scenario

The whole BRICS concept is based on the idea of accommodating differences and avoiding the dominance of a single country's interest, political view, or ideology. Thus, the group has not issued a joint statement about the crisis. India and China would have found it intrusive, and other members have sought to downplay this conflict. As Brosig (2021) and Panova (2021) explain in this Special Section, BRICS' core principles (e.g. respect for sovereignty) and its operational mechanisms such as the formal consensus rule and informal commitment not to import conflicts, suggest that BRICS cooperation will continue uninterrupted. Vazquez's (2021) contribution notes that Brazil does not practice policy interventions into such conflicts. Brosig (2021) highlights that South Africa will not formally intervene, although it previously proposed that the group deepens its cooperation on peacebuilding. Panova (2021) argues that Russia thinks India and China can deal with the crisis themselves, but that it will keep engaging them through the Russia-India-China group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other bodies as needed. In other words, this conflict is formally a non-issue for BRICS.

Such a compartmentalization strategy has been working well for many organizations pursuing functional collaboration. For example, countries in conflict co-exist and regularly co-participate in the UN, and the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe involved the Soviet Union and the US in a dialogue during the Cold War. Prior research highlights that direct intervention in enduring conflicts can make matters worse, and completely unrelated channels to the conflict can help increase positivity and decrease negativity between the disputants (Coleman, 2011). BRICS can thus enable India and China not only to compartmentalize the conflict but also to use functional cooperation to increase

trust. The BRICS mechanism proved its effectiveness in the context of the Doklam standoff in 2017 in the India–China–Bhutan tri-junction where Indian troops stopped Chinese troops from constructing a road in the territory disputed by Bhutan and China (O'Donnell, 2018). This raised concerns that India and China were on the brink of war, but China agreed to pull back when India stated it might not attend the 2017 BRICS Xiamen Summit. This showed that BRICS summits can serve as forcing events to set aside intra-BRICS conflicts.

It can be argued that the Russia-organized BRICS Leaders' Summit in 2020 had a similar role. While the COVID-19 pandemic could have provided a good excuse not to hold the Summit or postpone it without losing face, BRICS leaders held the Summit virtually. Moreover, not only did BRICS leaders meet, but they made a point of deepening security cooperation. They made progress on the issue area India has been championing – counter-terrorism – by launching a BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Similarly, China as an active promoter of economic and trade cooperation among the BRICS, saw gains from the Summit, which adopted the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership until 2025 (see also Nan, 2020). Thus, the 2020 BRICS Summit demonstrated that mutual gains for China and India were still possible within the BRICS format.

Notwithstanding this recent demonstration of loyalty to BRICS, at the group level, BRICS is not a full-fledged organization with a binding treaty designed to exert a strong compliance pull. It is a relatively small setting where the conflict between two out of five members can be strongly felt, and the two members perceiving each other as the enemy can spoil promising policy initiatives. The BRICS Leaders' Summit in 2021 will be a more robust test of the group's ability to pursue business-as-usual coexistence, mutual respect and policy gains while promoting the establishment of a rule-based system for co-managing the global order (also see de Coning et al. 2015). BRICS' 2020 Summit was in Russia and jeopardizing the Summit would have damaged India and China's strong bilateral relationships with Russia. The challenges of the 2021 BRICS Summit lie in the fact that India not only needs to host President Xi, but also justify its more visible investments into BRICS. If further tensions lead to a deadlock among the BRICS countries, its more proactive members willing to champion new initiatives might turn to other mini-lateral platforms such as India-Brazil-South Africa or create new platforms. While the conflict may not disrupt NDB or CRA in their niche areas, these institutions are the strong tentacles of an imaginary octopus rather than its strategic head.

Since BRICS' goal is to pursue democratization of global governance and inclusive multipolarity for a more harmonious and just global order, a major conflict between the poles would lead to a mission creep and damage the group's legitimacy and image. Vacillating between the world where BRICS contributes to global policy solutions and the world where its members are a part of the emerging geopolitical problem (adding to US–China/Russia tensions), is likely to become particularly challenging for the group.

2.2. Institutional adjustment scenario: managing operations in light of the conflict

An alternative scenario assumes that BRICS would be willing to change its standard approach and manage its operations differently. This adjustment can be either formal or informal. Formally, BRICS does not have a conflict management mechanism for intragroup conflict resolution, but it can develop one. Conflict management in international institutions is increasingly professionalized, and many institutions have functioning dispute settlement mechanisms. During the 2019 BRICS Legal Forum, BRICS recognized the urgent need to establish BRICS Dispute Resolution Centres within BRICS member states, but the group's focus was on commercial rather than interstate disputes. Mediation avenues could also be explored. A country holding the BRICS Presidency could act as a mediator or BRICS could design a new BRICS Unit for Mediation building on ongoing efforts to develop the Global South Unit for Mediation. BRICS can also discuss larger-scale peacebuilding projects such as peace parks: for example, the China/India border area could be designated as a transboundary BRICS peace park where environmental and infrastructure cooperation can help build and sustain peace (see also Ali, 2007).

Informally, the BRICS countries can adjust their approaches to intra-BRICS collaboration. If we look at India–China conflict as a destabilizing shock to the BRICS system, we may not see an immediate effect on cooperation, and some changes may take more time to manifest themselves. As Vazquez (2021) argues, India–China conflict reinforces bilateralization of intra-BRICS relationships, rather than leading to multilateral investment in advancing community interests. Furthermore, the conflict may limit BRICS' policy space for joint efforts in some cooperation areas. It is likely that intra-BRICS' integration processes will be affected, while broader BRICS' efforts to jointly contribute to producing global public goods will continue uninterrupted.

Both Brosig (2021) and Panova (2021) acknowledge that BRICS never aspired to be a security alliance with mutual defence commitments. Thus, the fact that alliance formation is becoming less of an option now is not a concern. Both Chaulia's (2021) and Niu and Hong's (2021) essays elaborate on the range of benefits BRICS currently provides and will continue to provide to both China and India. For China, BRICS helps dilute US influence and ideas and seeks an alternative development model for global governance. India derives immediate economic benefits from cooperating with China on NDB and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and BRICS raises its status and prestige. While rational arguments for maintaining India–China cooperation remain strong and, as these essays suggest, seem to have a continued buy-in of their governmental elites, this does not necessarily mean that the needed operational adjustments will be minor. Negative sentiments toward the other country can affect broader communities of practice supporting BRICS as well as undermine BRICS' efforts to increase people-to-people, cultural and educational initiatives and other ways of building connectivity.

The current situation also questions the effectiveness of President Xi and Prime Minister Modi's efforts to establish a strong personal relationship such as the use of gestures beyond international protocol during bilateral summits and various new ways of building mutual trust (see Verma and Papa's (2021) Introduction to the Special Section). Whether this personal dimension and chemistry of the relationship is overrated or if it can still help inject a new impetus into China–India relations remains to be seen.

3. Moving forward: collective leadership for innovation and sustainable development?

As BRICS continues at a time of India–China conflict and COVID-19 which left its member countries among the most affected in the world, how can BRICS add value to global governance? Can it still invest in the strengths that differentiate it and set strategies to bolster its collective leadership?

The essays in this volume suggest that BRICS' ideal is to create a new way of thinking that is not against anyone but for progress and innovation in delivering global public goods. BRICS' core competence lies in bringing its members together to provide a new direction for global policy and produce concrete results. BRICS has already enabled the five countries to address the core global governance challenges in a more systematic and networked manner, but its collective leadership has yet to evolve, as the group's approaches to COVID-19 and sustainable development illustrate.

3.1. COVID-19 lessons: from a pre-pandemic health coalition to bilateralism and new power asymmetries?

A global policy crisis should be a major opportunity for a group of countries that seek to demonstrate their global leadership credentials and act as a steering committee. Yet despite the fact that coalitional leadership can take many forms, BRICS' response to COVID-19 has left a lot to be desired. As a group, BRICS could have provided a joint vision and direction to fight COVID-19, brokered a BRICS consensus that sets norms of responsible stakeholder behaviour or translated its joint power resources into bargaining leverage to enhance global health governance. Since BRICS cooperation deepens only when there is full consensus, limited collective efforts reveal that the BRICS countries have not been ready to co-manage the crisis despite their ongoing health cooperation.

Health cooperation is one of the group's oldest and fairly prominent cooperation areas, both in terms of intra-BRICS cooperation and the group's cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO). When COVID-19 appeared, BRICS had eight years of experience cooperating on the health agenda, which first received more substantive consideration during the 2011 BRICS Leaders' Summit in China. BRICS health ministers have held regular meetings since 2011 and formed five working groups in 2013 to deepen cooperation on specific agenda items. Furthermore, in 2018, South Africa proposed to establish the Vaccine Research Centre for collaboration with BRICS vaccine innovation and

development partners (DIRCO, 2018), which has not been implemented. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis did not land on a blank cooperation slate but found fertile ground for policy coordination.

BRICS has had strong incentives to address the crisis given its members' high vulnerability to COVID-19, but as the contributions to this Special Section illustrate, its response to COVID-19 shows mixed success. On the one hand, BRICS turned towards each other in crisis: the crisis led to an increase in BRICS-level communications and response planning, and the NDB played a crucial role in approving emergency loans to help the BRICS countries fight the pandemic (see also Niu and Hong's essay). On the other hand, BRICS has witnessed bi-lateralization of vaccine diplomacy, with some dyads such as Russia–China and Brazil–India mostly deepening their partnerships, while other dyads such as Brazil–China and India–China seeing increased tensions (Vazquez, 2021; also see Narlikar, 2020). BRICS countries did not prioritize each other's vaccines. For example, India and China have not approved each other's vaccines, so they cannot be found in their respective markets. Similarly, the Brazilian regulatory agency Anvisa did not approve the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine despite the fact that it was approved in many other countries. Also, despite BRICS' focus on increasing people-to-people connections, the BRICS countries have not given each other preferential treatment such as relaxed travel controls.

The key global governance leadership question – how BRICS can influence other countries and the system itself – remained marginalized given the challenges of BRICS-level consensus-building. For example, South Africa and India's 2020 proposal at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to waive any COVID-19 vaccines, treatments, and associated accessories from patent enforcement for low- and middle-income countries exemplified such leadership. Brazil joined the opposition, China offered conditional support, and the proposal was rejected. Establishing the BRICS vaccine R&D centre can potentially help ameliorate this discord, but this will require managing complex public-private partnerships across BRICS. Launching the Sinovac Biotech-led facility as a part of the BRICS' future centre rather than the centre itself is a case in point.

In June 2021, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi (2021) highlighted the importance of both Chinese and BRICS' contributions to tackling the pandemic, contrasting 'vaccine hoarding and export restrictions taken by a few developed countries' with BRICS' efforts to offer vaccines to the international community. While this criticism might resonate among BRICS, the BRICS countries are divided on China's own contribution to the crisis. As concerns about China's initial inaction in blocking the spread of COVID-19, its approach to WHO investigators and calls for reparations proliferate, other BRICS countries will need to decide how to position themselves towards China (see also Subramani, 2020; UK FCDO, 2021). BRICS has already failed to act as a supportive community when Brazilian officials blamed China for the spread of the virus and linked the pandemic to Beijing's 'plan for world domination' (Harris and Schipani,

2020). While the power asymmetry between China and other BRICS countries has often been emphasized as a barrier to BRICS' cohesion (e.g. Hooijmaaijers, 2019), this asymmetry is now reinforced due to the economic effects of COVID-19 that combine with general growth trajectories (see both Chaulia's and Niu and Hong's essays). As O'Neill (2021) argues, while Brazil, Russia and (to a lesser extent) India have had economic challenges, China alone enjoyed remarkable success during the past decade: its economy is now around 15 times bigger than it was in 2001. These developments reposition China within BRICS and, as Niu and Hong (2021) argue, raise a question of what India and other BRICS need to do to keep China interested and engaged in BRICS. As the competition between China and the United States increases, China's strategic partnership with the BRICS countries is likely to rise on its policy agenda (see also Chaulia Vazquez in this Special Section).

3.2. Positive effects of the New Development Bank?

Another major BRICS contribution to global governance was expected to be in the field of sustainable development. The BRIC group argued in 2009 that the 'implementation of the concept of sustainable development (...) should be a major vector in the change of paradigm of economic development'. However, BRICS has not explicitly and jointly worked on – or directly organized to accelerate – the key universal effort to implement the concept: the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. Despite many BRICS meetings and working groups, there has not been a systematic effort to prioritise SDG implementation and move beyond one-liners in summit declarations. Yet the SDG agenda is an opportunity for the BRICS countries to position themselves as responsible powers changing the traditional North–South dynamics and pursuing a promising third way that can inspire others (see also Papa and Gleason, 2013).

The contributions to this Special Section are aligned in recognizing NDB's importance both as a magnet for China and India's continued engagement with BRICS and as a crucial factor in the evolution of BRICS more generally. In line with the 21st century development needs, NDB has the pursuit of sustainable development explicitly in its mandate and focuses on delivering clean renewable energy projects faster than the incumbent banks. Yet NDB's core differentiation from other banks is in its innovative efforts to 'right the wrongs' of the traditional, predominantly Western, multilateral development finance (Cooper, 2017; Wang, 2019). Namely, NDB reflects a strong commitment to equality across its core membership (e.g. in subscribed capital and voting power) and seeks to use green bonds denominated in BRICS' national currencies.

However, as Vazquez's (2021) essay explains, NDB has not yet offered an innovative vision or an original approach to development that would lead to the broader BRICS mobilization on sustainable development. One could have imagined that a combination of Brazil's long-term sustainable development leadership; Russia's geopolitical manoeuvring; India's approach to equity; China's efforts to reinvent its own economic system; and South Africa's human security

leadership would merge into a brand-new vision of transitioning to sustainable development. Yet although NDB's name evokes 'new development,' NDB's current setup is not meant to think big, but experiment, avoid new ideologies, and operate at a small scale. Given its formality and major investments, NDB certainly contributes to sustainable development while also acting as the glue that keeps BRICS together. It cements BRICS as a political entity and an analytical category. This approach is politically feasible at this stage of NDB's development. However, creating an effective governance for sustainable development is unlikely without a major policy intervention. If BRICS wants to exert leadership in this field, it needs to build on NDB consensus to provide an intellectual vision for transitioning the system to sustainable development and use issue linkages across cooperation areas to achieve this vision.

In parallel, as the BRICS group keeps broadening its policy agenda to involve an ever-growing number of stakeholders and issue areas, it certainly brings people together (Panova, 2021 in this Special Section), but its strategic contribution to addressing global governance challenges may suffer. If BRICS wants to use the India–China crisis as a developmental opportunity, it needs to examine where it can make the most difference and ensure that these efforts get prioritized. For example, the BRICS format is currently not the best fit for some important global policy challenges such as climate change given the countries' preference to address climate change through other mechanisms (e.g. the BASIC coalition comprising Brazil, South Africa, India and China). However, it is particularly promising for global policy issues which feature limited or non-existent regulation and are likely to significantly impact the future of global governance. The artificial intelligence (AI) revolution and automation are cases in point. The new BRICS innovation centre in Xiamen enables BRICS to position itself as a partnership on New Industrial Revolution and think about the use of new technologies and their effects as a group.

Interestingly, NDB has always been envisioned to move 'from best practices to next practices' (Maasdorp, 2015). This mantra can be applied to thinking about India–China conflict as well as overall BRICS collaboration. While the BRICS countries' determination to continue their engagement suggests that there is interest in pursuing new policy ideas, rethinking how to energize the members around a new long-term, global policy-relevant narrative is crucial. The anti-hegemonic narrative of diluting/diversifying US global leadership has helped mobilize BRICS countries pursuing upward mobility and multipolarity. However, in the era of changing US leadership philosophies, the demise of the Western liberal narrative (Glaser, 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic, BRICS needs to create an original, content-focused leadership narrative. For instance, what will be the frontier global policy issues in the next 30 years and what kind of global governance can BRICS develop to address them? And will it seek to include or exclude other powers and support the system's weakest actors in making this new global governance a reality? Re-examining BRICS policy on internal conflicts, building a BRICS strategy on simple rules,

and identifying a few priority processes to implement them can ensure that BRICS cooperation deepens and becomes self-reinforcing.

As Georgy Toloraya (2020) aptly observed, the BRICS mechanism was created and works well, but its aim is not clear: BRICS is like a car with five passengers who can't agree where to go, and the driver changes every year. To continue the metaphor, BRICS can thrive if it checks the engine, goes hybrid and automatic and starts building the wings. Otherwise, using the car only for occasional trips can save a lot of emissions.

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