

CHAPTER 22

The staying power of the BRICS

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Global governance is accelerating toward a pluralistic future, moving beyond the traditional dominance of the West.¹ Weakened considerably by the presidency of Donald Trump, and the more generalized retreat from liberal institutionalism, the world order is in process of punctuated transformation.² Even if its military power remains paramount, the capacity of a domestic-oriented United States to lead with ample followers is severely limited.³ And with Brexit and other strains of populism, the ability of the European Union (EU) to compensate in terms of the projection of normative power is highly contested as well.

In the 2020–2022 period, three sets of major developments demonstrated the different ways in which the leading non-Western countries are entangled with global governance arrangements and the enduring internal contradictions that undercut their ability to find common cause in world affairs. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated further the critical position of China in global supply chains of pharmaceutical products and medical equipment, the potential of China and India to serve as pharmacies to the world, and their potential to provide vaccines to developing countries to offset the vaccine nationalism of the rich industrialized

countries that outbid them in securing multiple doses of vaccines for their own citizens. Armed clashes between Chinese and Indian soldiers in mid-2020 showed that the group solidarity of the BRICS is insufficient to overcome deadly bilateral power struggles within the grouping. And in February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted how threats to state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and other foundational norms of the global order are not always located in the "wicked" West.

What the precise architecture of global governance will be in the new era remains unclear. Certain characteristics have emerged, nonetheless. One is that the traditional formal institutions at the apex of global governance will continue to struggle with respect to status. Although the United Nations (UN), the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have abundant built-in legitimacy in terms of numbers of members, all face ongoing questions about their instrumental performance.⁴ Another is that some of the potential informal options are no longer viable. Not only has the image of a G1 unipolar world faded, but a potential substitute in the form of suggested concerts has fallen flat.⁵ Nor has the G7, without Russia, and straining to expand both

its links to other democratic countries beyond the old establishment, and its functional leadership in the context of COVID-19 and the Ukraine crisis, regained its importance.

Yet, if we have moved beyond the predictable options of the early twenty-first century, there is no sign of a return to rigid polarization along North/South or East/West lines found in the post-1945 years.⁶ The Rest has become far more varied, with a sharp spread between winners and losers of globalization.⁷ Some such as the BRICS, the group of countries at the core of this chapter, have been able to shape these trends to their own advantages.⁸ Although generic in some respects, the BRICS—originally Brazil, Russia, India, and China, with South Africa added in 2011—are different from other countries from the Global South.⁹ This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the group and then analyzes its evolution, role in contemporary global governance, and limitations.

The BRICS, an overview

All five members have demonstrated an impressive global reach in terms of their diplomatic profile.

The stretch of China's international influence has been well documented.^{[10](#)} India has become engaged with a wide number of alternative institutions—from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, to tentative relations with a putative D10 connected to the G7—as old and new friends alike vie for attention and deals. And, albeit highly contested, Russia has expanded its reach from Syria to many parts of Africa.

Many other non-Western countries continue to be highly vulnerable, marginal to the core shifts in economic power whether interpreted via the dynamic of geopolitical multipolarity or the deepened processes of systemic and complex interdependence. Some, most notably small island states, face existential problems relating to the environment. Others need to resort to unorthodox strategies to carve out a place in the global political economy. Few other than the BRICS are big enough to escape the context of their immediate neighborhoods.^{[11](#)}

The ascendancy of informal modes of governance has benefited countries that in early eras were kept out of the central concerts of power.^{[12](#)} This is especially true of the BRICS countries, which continued to face the massive gaps in post-1945,

post-1975, and even the post-1989 systems of governance. But the trend extends to an expanded cluster including many categorized in the past as middle powers. As such, no longer can global governance be visualized in exclusive terms.

The contrasts with older constructs are reinforced in turn by the ambiguity of the relationship between rising non-Western powers and the embedded global order. The BRICS are the major beneficiaries of both multipolarity and deepening systemic interdependence. However, despite considerable success stories, the BRICS should not be treated only in a parallel fashion. Indeed, treated simply as economic actors, the BRICS present mixed results.^{[13](#)}

Despite its increasing prominence in academic and popular commentary on international economic and political affairs, the nature of the BRICS is still not well understood. This confusion stems largely from the multiple meanings that have been attached to the BRICS label since it was first introduced by Goldman Sachs' Jim O'Neill in the early 2000s. Initially created to highlight shifts in the underlying economic dynamics of the international system, the BRICS has grown to encompass an economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical phenom-

enon with significant momentum and geostrategic implications.

Such a reframing emphasizes ambiguity. On the other hand, the BRICS remain frustrated that they are still not able to shape the rules of the global system. The first choice of the BRICS remained the formally mandated organizations, especially the UN with its unique legitimacy. In practice, however, these organizations fell short. Not all the BRICS are in the UN Security Council. And the IFIs continue to be weighted in favor of the West, not only the big powers but even such small and middle powers as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada.

This ambiguity calibrated the attitude of the BRICS to the G20, the world's premier informal economic grouping.¹⁴ In the midst of the global financial crisis, all of the BRICS accepted membership in the elevated G20 at the leaders' level, without hesitation or concessions. In many ways, the G20 filled a major form of governance gap and represents the best crossover point between legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency. At the same time, there remained a distance between the role of the old establishment and the BRICS in the ability to put their stamp on the G20. In membership and mode of practice (including the question of host-

ing) the early stages of the summit were dominated by the G7 members, and especially the United States and the United Kingdom.

The paradox of the G20 was that, while it brought the BRICS into the hub of global governance at an institutional level, it also made the creation of an autonomous forum with membership only for the BRICS inevitable. Once the avenue of informality was opened up at a highly visible and operationally significant level (beyond just the technically oriented G20 made up of finance ministers and central bankers), the way was clear for a summit process made up of these countries by themselves to take form.

To be sure, the economic narrative presented by Jim O'Neill¹⁵—that the BRICS stood in the vanguard of the emerging markets whose economic growth was destined to outstrip and indeed anchor the rest of the world—was necessary to grab attention. It pointed to a different challenge from the Global South, one premised not on a sense of ideological fervor (and an emphasis on the weight of numbers) but on the weight of material clout, both individually and collectively. The Chinese ambassador to India for example noted on the eve of the fourth summit in New Delhi that the BRICS “ac-

count for 42 percent of the global population, make up 18 percent of the world GDP and 15 percent of the world total trade volume. Their contribution to the world economic growth rate was estimated to exceed 50 percent.”¹⁶ Focusing attention on the four big original BRICS as the dynamic global motors of growth possessed enormous appeal.

Still, this is not a sufficient theme to justify an extended analysis of the BRICS in terms of global governance. An assessment of the BRICS that only looks at the economic criteria highlights the differences as much as the similarities. China’s economic success has its roots in the adoption of agricultural reforms in the mid-1970s, supplemented in the 1990s with large increases in foreign direct investment (FDI) in manufacturing. Growth in India has been led by the indigenous services sector rather than exports of manufactures financed by FDI inflows as in China. Brazil’s economic fortunes are tied closely to export growth concentrated in agriculture and natural resources—a profile more exaggerated in Russia. By most standards, China is far ahead of the other BRICS in terms of economic performance. Trade is quite low among the BRICS, except for the bilateral relationship with China.

Underscoring the need to go beyond a narrow economic-driven analysis of BRICS is the uneven performance of the member countries. While all did extremely well through the immediate global financial crisis, they have fallen back since 2012. A common revised image is one of broken BRICS.¹⁷ And mutual funds based on the BRICS have been wound down, including the one created by Goldman Sachs. Again, though, the uniqueness of the BRICS is in its staying power. If the BRICS is explicitly a manifestation of the altered challenge from the Global South, a challenge based on a claim on strength and weakness, this strength is as much a diplomatic as an economic manifestation. What gives the BRICS a claim for uniqueness is its ability to span continents, political systems, values, as well as economic models.

Through their collective action, the BRICs countries have worked hard to present themselves as a cohesive, like-minded group. This effort, however, belies sharp, and in recent times, deepening differences in the political, economic, and policy approaches of the member states. There are fundamental sources of competition between the BRICS. China and India, as well as Russia and China, had sharp legacies of territorial disputes. In 2017, the

BRICS summit was caught up in an intensifying geopolitical contest between India and China punctuated by a dramatic escalation of tensions around the Doklam standoff, with armed forces of the two countries facing off in the Sikkim sector of the China–India boundary. This was followed by hand-to-hand combat in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that were the deadliest clashes since 1967.^{[18](#)}

In terms of influence on the architecture of global governance, the existence of the BRICS demonstrates the degree of fragmentation and competition in the global system. But the meaning of this separation remains unclear. The BRICS can be taken to be part of a hedging approach that allows its members some flexibility. It can also be analyzed as a lobby group that attempts to leverage the weight of the “rising” big powers through collective action. It can finally be interpreted as a revisionist challenge to the global order.

The evolution of the BRICS

Looking back at its creation it is the ability of the BRICS to play up commonalities and play down differences that stand out. One of the major cata-

lysts for the creation of the BRICS came via the relationship with the G7/8. Attempts to reform the G8 from the inside were directed through the so-called Heiligendamm or Outreach 5 (O5) process between 2005 and 2009, through which different members of the G8 took the lead in reaching out to a cluster of emerging markets and regional hubs, a grouping that included Brazil, China, India, and South Africa as well as Mexico (with Russia outside as the Russian Federation had become a member of the G8 and was not viewed as part of the Global South).¹⁹ One unanticipated effect was the consolidation of a small group of big countries from the Global South into new habits of working together.

The functional range of every Big Five member on the diplomatic axis is far greater than that of other G20 developing country members. Confirmation of this elevated status accorded to the BRICS came in the rotation of the presidency of G20 Finance: India in 2002, China in 2005, South Africa in 2007, and Brazil in 2008 at the central moment of that year's financial crisis. By the 2007 Heiligendamm summit, it was clear that major international challenges could not be addressed without the ongoing cooperation of the large countries of the Global South. The formalization of the

Heiligendamm process tried to accomplish this goal within clear boundaries.^{[20](#)}

In addition to the increased legitimacy of the G8, the informal dialogue was intended to create trust, bring more understanding of common responsibilities on global issues, and explore avenues for stalled negotiations in other international forums, especially the Doha Round. The basic structure relied on a steering committee and four working groups (co-chaired by G8 and O5 countries) on investment, energy, development, and innovation—central topics for the G8. Migration and governance, preferred topics of the O5, were excluded.

However, several mishaps at the launch of the Heiligendamm process as well as the general approach to it as “outreach” did not contribute to the process. The most infamous incident was the release of the communiqué that announced the establishment of the Heiligendamm process without any input from the O5 and before the emerging powers actually joined the G8 meetings.^{[21](#)} Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh’s remark was telling: “We have come here not as petitioners but as partners in an equitable, just and fair management of the global community of nations, which we accept as reality in the globalized world.”^{[22](#)} It was

seconded by a hopeful statement from China that the G8 Outreach would not be used as “a means of exerting pressure on developing countries.”²³

With a lowkey profile, the O5 risked being submerged in the world of proliferating labels. At the conceptual level, the standard terminology for representing the group of rising countries had been the Big Emerging Markets or Big Ten.²⁴ But over time a wider array of labels emerged portraying rising powers. At one end of the spectrum, the cluster can be sharply compressed. The term “Chindia” is popular as a means to differentiate the super-sized character of China and India.²⁵ At the other end, an element of diffuseness is added in constellations such as CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa), MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey), and the Next 11 (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, Vietnam). An alternative way of slicing groups of countries—conceptually and theoretically more coherent and of greater policy utility—is as “pivot states,” those with profitable relationships with multiple other countries, and “shadow states,” those unable to break free of the gravitational pull of a single powerful state, such as

Mexico and Ukraine vis-à-vis the United States and Russia respectively.^{[26](#)}

What these conceptualizations lacked was the same degree of balance between economic clout and geopolitical agency built into the Big Emerging Market model. The criterion for assessing the status of these countries is in terms of material/commercial strength. Capabilities involving diplomatic will and skill are completely neglected. Gross domestic product (GDP) is showcased, but diplomatic leverage is not.

If in terms of practice, BRICS faced some competition from a number of other acronyms—above all IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China). BRICS soon established a dominant position both conceptually because of its association with the key “rising states,” and in terms of comparative perspective because of the translation from an artificial construct to an operational form of activity. BRICS is a rare, if not unique, phenomenon: a diplomatic grouping that follows an acronym coined by a private sector analyst. It is not the product of diplomatic negotiations based on shared political values or common economic interests. Moving from a 2001 turn of phrase from

a Goldman Sachs' economist, an operational grouping was born.

Signs appeared that the concept of BRICs was being reconfigured as a grouping prior to the financial crisis. In October 2007 the foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India met in Harbin, China. In May 2008 all four BRICs foreign ministers met for a day in Yekaterinburg. The global financial crisis shifted the balance more dramatically between the old establishment and the “rising” states. The first official BRIC summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia (June 2009), with subsequent meetings in Brasilia (April 2010), Hainan (April 2011), New Delhi (March 2012), Durban (March 2013), Fortaleza (July 2014), Ufa (July 2015), Goa (October 2016), Xiamen (September 2017), Johannesburg (July 2018), Brasília (November 2019), Saint Petersburg (by video, November 2020), and New Delhi (by video, September 2021).

The BRICS' advancement of global governance

At the very least, BRICS is a useful grouping for members to share and learn from one another's development experiences. They come to the global governance table with a mutually reinforcing sense of historical grievances and claims to represent the interests of all developing countries.²⁷ They share (but do not always respect) a neo-Westphalian commitment to state sovereignty and nonintervention. They profess a shared vision of inclusive global growth and the rapid socio-economic transformation of their own nations in which no village is left behind. Their resource endowments show many complementarities. They proclaim the need for a rules-based, stable, and predictable world order that respects the diversity of political systems and stages of development.

Politically, the Delhi Declaration signaled a growing self-consciousness among the five BRICS that they have global weight and mean to begin using it. The statements on Syria and Iran marked out a clear "product differentiation" from the dominant trans-Atlantic policy on contemporary global controversies. To be sure, in the crucial vote on a draft Security Council resolution on Syria in July 2012, reflecting its identity as an open economy and a

plural democracy, India sided with the West, while China and Russia cast a double veto. Yet,

one of the *advantages* of the BRICS process is that it remains a loose association of states with somewhat disparate interests, so no effort is made to force a common position when the BRICS states cannot agree on one. But these states have also found a way to disagree on some key issues... without torpedoing the entire enterprise.^{[28](#)}

In the context of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, a confident BRICS resented calls for “responsible” stakeholder policies as efforts to subjugate their worldviews to the Global North’s priorities. Rather they generally take an instrumental approach to international governance. For example, China and Russia are instinctively suspicious of the very notion of global governance as a self-serving Western concept, preferring informal gatherings of big powers and regional institutions to formal multilateral machinery.^{[29](#)}

The confidence of the BRICS was on display in 2012. During the June G20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, the BRICS’ leaders held consultations on

the sidelines to announce increased contributions to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to strengthen its currency stabilization role.³⁰ It was a significant moment in cementing the shift in international economic relationships, with the BRICS as the world's dominant creditors and Europe and the United States as the leading new debtors. To reflect this change, the BRICS have been calling for increased voice and vote on issues of global finance. Yet, even with the reforms of 2008 and 2010, the industrialized economies of the North retain a 55.3 percent voting share in the IMF, with EU countries by themselves accounting for 29.4 percent.³¹ There is today a spectacular but unsustainable disconnect between the highly indebted but politically dominant industrialized economies and, following that, between the distribution of decision-making authority in the existing IFIs and the realignment of economic power equations in the real world. In other words, the emerging new global balance of power necessitates that old global political imbalances be adjusted to the new global economic imbalances.

Since 2012, however, the focus of cooperation has been the New Development Bank (NDB), the initiative that represents the most significant in-

stitutional innovation to emerge from the BRICS summit process. At the BRICS Fortaleza Summit in Brazil in 2014, the countries established the NDB with an initial \$50 billion fund, with equal stakes provided by each of the members.³² At the same time, the countries agreed to establish the Currency Reserve Agreement (CRA), amounting to \$100 billion as a buttress against any future financial crisis. Such a move, although necessitating a protracted diplomatic process, addressed the most common criticism of the BRICS, that it lacks action rather than talk.³³ With an eye to reinforcing the image of the BRICS as an instrumental driver, the first projects of the NDB were announced in 2016.

As in other areas of the BRICS, the NDB has been underestimated. Although the NDB initially grabbed major attention as the “mortar” in the BRICS, it subsequently fell back in profile in relation to the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As the *Economist* noted, the NDB

has received far less attention than another multi-lateral lender launched a short time later, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) ... Take *The Economist's* own coverage: a dozen articles have men-

tioned the NDB, whereas the AIIB has cropped up in roughly 60.

Despite the BRICS' overall weakness, the *Economist* continued: "their most tangible creation—a bank that aims to reshape the world of development finance—is making surprising headway."³⁴

Limitations on the BRICS

Notwithstanding these advances, some caution is warranted about the robustness of these contours of transition in global governance. One explanation of the trajectory of the BRICS points to a comprehensive process of realignment of power, with a new alternative concert of oppositional/adversarial states taking shape. Equally, however, there are strong counter-forces to reconfigured interstate polarization and "overt balancing."³⁵ The most serious drag on the prospects of the BRICS being a major force in global governance is not resistance by the old order but serious differences in values and interests among the group's members.

In all of them, domestic priorities and problems trump club solidarity. All are still in relatively early stages of development. The April 2010 Brasilia summit was shortened into a one-day event when President Hu Jintao went home early to deal with a major earthquake that killed over 600 people in Western China. In June, another BRIC summit around the Toronto G20 was canceled when President Lula da Silva stayed home because of the massive floods in northeast Brazil.^{[36](#)}

These constraints are exacerbated by the political, social, and economic problems facing all the BRICS. Only China has maintained the projections anticipated by Goldman Sachs, and even Chinese growth has slowed down.^{[37](#)} Corruption remains a major problem in all of the BRICS. And political turmoil has cut into the confidence of a number of BRICS, most notably in Brazil and South Africa.

Among the elements of “glue” in terms of originally shaping the collective culture of the BRICS was the role of Brazil. Initially, Lula was the high-profile face of the BRICS. Although not as strong economically or strategically as China, Brazil built on its reputation at the international and regional levels. Over time, Brazil fell behind other BRICS in its leadership capacity beyond the Lula years, a

situation exacerbated by the incompetence of President Jair Bolsonaro.

The BRICS remain riven with rivalries over borders, resources, and status. With long and not always settled borders, India and Russia have problems with China. Two of the five are authoritarian states, although all three democracies have a tradition of reticence in global democracy-promotion efforts. They are divided on reform of the UN Security Council, with China's interest lying more in a bipolar than a genuinely multipolar global order, and on the global economic effects of China's currency value.

Each of the BRICS retains deep and specific ties with pivotal Northern countries in the general context of complex interdependence vis-à-vis the global economy. All five have a greater stake in bilateral relations with the United States for reasons of market power, investments, and high technology. Recently India has entered into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Australia, and Japan with an implicit agenda of countering China in the Indo-Pacific maritime space. Realist scholars also signal the prospect of an alternative alignment with the US-led North if one of the BRICS rises faster and in a more antagonistic

manner than the others. John Mearsheimer points in particular to “China’s Unpeaceful Rise” as a catalyst for this type of balancing response.^{[38](#)}

Nor do the BRICS always act in concert within other institutional settings. Stefan Schrim, for instance, highlights the presence of mixed coalitions within G20, where ad hoc groupings reflect a variety of arrangements comprising both developed and developing countries, and where like-minded groupings such as the established G8 and the BRICS co-mingle on a variety of issue areas.^{[39](#)} This, in turn, illustrates that cohesiveness among the BRICS has not congealed to the point where the diplomatic grouping acts as a bloc across an array of institutional settings. This was highlighted in 2012 when the BRICS failed to mount a united campaign for either the Nigerian or the Colombian candidate against the ultimately successful US nominee for the World Bank presidency.^{[40](#)}

The differences are most noticeable between China and India. What binds China and India is a common defense of the principle of sovereignty. However, some explicit differences have appeared, especially with the move by India to insert the issue of its relationship with Pakistan into the BRICS at the Goa summit.

To its credit, the BRICS have remained united on key geopolitical issues. The BRICS rejected the suggestion by Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop that Russia be excluded from the G20's Brisbane Summit in November 2014.⁴¹ At Ufa, the leaders did not refer specifically to Russia's actions but only to the BRICS "deep concern about the situation in Ukraine" and the need to resolve the situation through "inclusive political dialogue." What is more, this delicate process of navigation appears to have been in play in February 2022. Russia's multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine sent seismic shockwaves through world capitals, portending transformative changes in Europe's security architecture and world politics. This came shortly after presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping issued a declaration of a "no limits partnership" in which they supported each other's policies on Taiwan and Ukraine.⁴² The G7 reacted with fury and imposed coordinated sanctions to punish Russia. China walked the tightrope and could emerge as the big strategic winner from heightened Russia-US tensions in and over Europe.⁴³ Russia's fellow BRICS partners reacted with markedly softer expressions of concern and boilerplate calls for a ceasefire, dialogue, and respect for the legitimate interests

of all sides, rather than specific and strong condemnation of Russian aggression. Both China and India abstained from the draft Security Council resolution on 25 February 2022 condemning Russian aggression that predictably was vetoed by Russia.⁴⁴

Western countries could decide to impose secondary sanctions on firms and countries continuing to trade with Russia. China would be heavily impacted by this but so too potentially would the other three BRICS partners. With India, for example, Russia remains a major legacy defense supplier. The net effect could well be to strengthen the conviction and accelerate efforts to weaken the dollar-denominated, US-led current international financial system. They might try to rewire the global financial architecture to reduce exposure to Western policy decisions that reflect geopolitical calculations in which the developing countries are not as heavily invested.

BRICS was more successful in crisis management of the 2017 Doklam standoff—notwithstanding media outlets in both countries stoking the tensions. Indeed, a de-escalation was facilitated by meetings between Xi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the informal BRICS meeting on

the sidelines of the Hamburg G-20 summit in August 2017.

The main question for the BRICS is whether this type of crisis management can be repeated, when necessary. For, as witnessed by the violent confrontation between Chinese and Indian forces in 2020, this scenario remains possible, with border tensions remaining highly sensitive and volatile.⁴⁵ Under these conditions, prominent Indian parliamentarian and former UN Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor asks if the BRICS are crumbling.⁴⁶ Still, amid the amplification of these stakes, remaining united is more likely than breaking apart. For one thing, the successful expansion of the membership of the NDB takes the focus away from the China–India bilateral relationship. Originally, the issue of expansion of membership was another source of tension. Expansion was widely viewed in India as a vehicle of adding to the leverage of China at the expense of India, especially if it targeted Beijing-friendly countries, especially Pakistan. With the addition of Bangladesh (along with the UAE and Uruguay) to the NDB in September 2021, these concerns have been allayed. Indeed, speculation concerning different scenarios related to the expansionary process has intensified, with

Argentina submitting a formal application to join the BRICS.⁴⁷ At odds with image of decline, Jorge Heine, a former Chilean ambassador to three BRICS countries (in chronological order, South Africa, India and China), points to a resurgence of BRICS, argues that Argentina's entry would invigorate a mechanism that has become a key platform for the Global South.⁴⁸

Arguably, more importantly, there is no sign of a downgrading of the BRICS by either China or India, or indeed the other members of BRICS. At odds with speculation in 2017 that Modi could pressure China on Doklam by signaling that he would not attend the Xiamen summit, such a highly visible gesture (which would have inflicted severe damage on the image and delivery of the BRICS) did not transpire. Most notably, the transition from India's chairmanship in 2021 to China's chairmanship in 2022 has been smooth. The first BRICS Sherpas meeting under China's chairmanship was held virtually on 18–19 January 2022, amid gestures of appreciation for India's performance in the previous year.

Conclusion

The BRICs are a reflection of the widening multipolar structure of the international system and thus a challenge to the old establishment. The existence of the BRICS is a function of the renewed prominence of informal multilateralism or plurilateralism, as well as the newfound agency and enhanced capacity of these countries in international politics. The consolidation of these countries into such groupings has placed them in an elevated strategic position within the wider governance architecture where, at summit-level institutions, emphasis is placed on South–South solidarity.

The challenge for the BRICS is in working from economic reality to a tighter sense of normative and ideational identity among the grouping's membership. It is easy and tempting to dismiss the BRICS as “more a way station than a summit”⁴⁹ because of the lack of commonality, existing tensions and squabbles, and potential serious conflicts that divide more than unite them. In the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, commitments made at the 14th BRICS summit – held in June 2022 by videolink and chaired by China's President Xi Jinping – to “promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms” and “to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity

of all States” can only reinforce perceptions of hypocrisy.⁵⁰

Yet, to its credit, the grouping has tried to put pressure on the West to facilitate and accommodate and not block the rise of emerging economies.⁵¹ For the first time, the sense of frustrated entitlement found expression in some concrete ideas on how to break through the frozen configuration of global privilege and power. The BRICS have put down markers that they intend to use their demographic and economic clout to challenge and change the way that the world is governed through formal multilateral machinery and informal groupings.

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