

LIGHTS, SHADOWS AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE BRICS**Dr. Jorge Isaac Torres Manrique*****ABSTRACT**

The BRICS have become a symbol of the growing economic and geopolitical influence of developing countries. Since its creation in 2006, this group has experienced remarkable economic growth, challenging the world order led by Western powers. However, the road to BRICS consolidation is not without obstacles and challenges. This analysis will explore the lights, shadows and challenges facing this group, covering issues such as economic cooperation, political integration, sustainable development and global influence. The BRICS are at a crossroads. Their economic growth and growing global influence offer opportunities for development and cooperation, but also present significant challenges. To realize their full potential, the BRICS must address social inequality, promote sustainable development, strengthen political cohesion and increase their influence in global governance. The future of this group will depend on its ability to overcome these challenges and work together to build a more just and equitable world. In this sense, the author of this paper not only focuses on developing the capital and transcendent subject of the lights, shadows and challenges of the BRICS, but also concludes, among other points, that the global and specific agendas of each country should prevail over those of the BRICS.

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INTRODUCTION

The BRICS define themselves as a “strategic partnership” and are currently positioning themselves first and foremost as a negotiating tool with the industrialized countries to strengthen their positions in global governance. To this end, the member countries deploy their actions within this format, but also in all the other bilateral, regional, multilateral, sectoral, etc. spaces they share (G20 in particular, WTO, UN system and negotiations with the G77 + China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the New Silk Roads, etc.). With the BRICS+, the group strengthens its geographical deployment (consolidating in Africa and Latin America and expanding in the Middle East) and opens a new chapter of its progressive institutionalization.²⁰⁶

However, numerous challenges, contradictions and limits will affect the orientations and future of this grouping: economic heterogeneity and asymmetries of the member countries (very important weight of the Chinese power¹⁰, coexistence of primary and rural economies, whose mode of relationship with Beijing contributes to keep them in situations of deindustrialization, significant differences in terms of production and wealth), persistence of poverty and inequalities in many countries, geopolitical rivalries between members (especially China/India with the Himalayan conflict, New Delhi's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) led by Washington against Beijing). These imbalances and contradictions are at work while the risk of dilution of the influence of the founding countries becomes more evident as the group expands and as China, in its strategic confrontation with the United States, seeks to strengthen and consolidate its support networks within the group. Beijing, based on its economic interests and diplomatic successes, is the initiator of the BRICS expansion movement and the integration of most of the new members. For their part, several member countries (Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, India) maintain numerous economic, commercial, financial, political, security and military relations with the United States and other Western countries.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES. *BRICS+: Towards a more multipolar world*. Online, retrieved on date 18/09/2024 from: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglefndmkaj/https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ESP_Nota-AFD-BRICS-Diciembre-2023.pdf. Paris, 2023, p. 4.

²⁰⁷ INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES. *BRICS+: Towards a more Multipolar world*. Ob. Cit. P. 4- 5.

In this paper, the author develops the various aspects of the lights, shadows and challenges of the BRICS, within the framework of a comprehensive analysis that embraces their evolution, progress and transformation.

LIGHTS

The enlargement of the BRICS was agreed by reconciling the different interests within the group. On the one hand, the geopolitical need of China and Russia, as an exhibition of not only economic and technological power vis-à-vis the United States and its Western allies, but also of political power, within the “tectonic plate movements” in the World Order, as a clear challenge to them. On the other hand, there is the position of Brazil and India, which is not anti-Western, but rather a search for better conditions in their negotiations, which explains the incorporation of Argentina, promoted by Brazil, as well as Egypt and Ethiopia, promoted by South Africa.²⁰⁸

Another important issue is to meet the demands for the inclusion of the Global South in the construction of a less asymmetrical economic order and closer to multilateralism, which is the path taken by Brazil and India, a demand that involves reforming the multilateral trade system, as well as the Monetary Fund and the World Bank and the UN System. Within this framework of harmony, there is also a reference to trade exchange mechanisms that take into account the use of national currencies other than the dollar. It is in this perspective that the renewed BRICS should move forward.²⁰⁹

Thus, the BRICS, with their evolution into the BRICS+, aim to continue a process of building an international space that can be oriented towards two possible future projects depending on the evolution of international recompositions and power relations. The first consists of positioning the BRICS+ as the instrument of a negotiation aimed at imposing a multipolarity that responds to their interests. The second is to gradually form a counter-hegemonic alliance around China (and secondarily Russia), a coalition of countries recalcitrant to the domination of the United States and other Western powers aligned with the policies of the world's leading power..²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ TELLO VIDAL, Luis Ernesto. *BRICS enlargement: new challenges to the World Order*. Online, retrieved on date 09/18/2024, available at: <https://polemos.pe/ampliacion-de-los-brics-nuevos-desafios-al-orden-mundial/>. Lima, 2023 (last visited on 31 October 2024)

²⁰⁹ TELLO VIDAL, Luis Ernesto. *BRICS enlargement: new challenges to the World Order*. Ob. Cit.

²¹⁰ TELLO VIDAL, Luis Ernesto. *BRICS enlargement: new challenges to the World Order*. Ob. Cit. P. 4.

Thus, the enlarged bloc, now called the “Emerging Economies” bloc, seeks to open a global financial system different from that of the West, led by the United States, as well as its own currency to bypass the “capitalist” financial institutions. This project will certainly be easier for India, which has advanced towards the digitalization of its currency and has promoted the bankarization of its immense population, the largest in the world.²¹¹

SHADOWS

Some of the current or potential limitations of the BRICS in coordinating their actions at the international level, which have been mentioned, are: i) trade divergences (WTO); ii) divergences in environmental matters; iii) dissimilar nuclear status; iv) internal rivalries (India and China); v) political systems of different natures; and vi) difference in weight or influence on the international chessboard. These circumstances, among others, would be the ones that would be giving rise to a relatively fragile BRICS, with a lack of clear common objectives and a marked tendency towards rhetorical behavior.²¹²

Not unrelated to this is the fear that China's hegemony will be consolidated not only within the bloc, but also in regions such as Latin America and Africa, where the expansion of its investments has been growing for almost three decades now. On the other hand, it is not the same to think of BRICS as an alternative group to the West, instead of being an anti-Western bloc; and these differences in conception could generate friction within the bloc, especially considering that decisions are made by consensus.²¹³

CHALLENGES

The complexity related to the difference in the nature of the political systems of the BRICS, which is posited as the most profound and structural of all. While none of the states comprising the group in question can be identified as “model” or “high quality” democracies, there is a very marked difference in trend between, on the one hand, Russia and China and, on the other, India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA). The nature of the domestic political regime of each state is likely to influence the general direction of their cooperation. We could

²¹¹ FAESLER CARLISLE, Julio. The challenge of the BRICS. Online, retrieved on date 09/18/2024, available at: <https://revistalanacion.com/mundo/el-reto-de-las-brics/2023-09-29> (last visited on 1 November 2024)

²¹² MICHELETTI, Rafael Eduardo. *Perspectives and challenges of the BRICS (and IBSA) as a South-South cooperation group*. Online, retrieved on date 09/18/2024 from: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/confines/v15n28/1870-3569-confines-15-28-49.pdf](https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/confines/v15n28/1870-3569-confines-15-28-49.pdf). 2019, p. 57.

²¹³ TELLO VIDAL, Luis Ernesto. *BRICS enlargement: new challenges to the World Order*. Ob. Cit.

imagine a tendency towards a more pragmatic and developmentalist cooperation in the case of IBSA, as well as a growing ideologized and dogmatic anti-hegemonism in the cases of Russia and China, although other factors also play a role. China's pragmatic peaceful rise could be a mere stage (a long one, to be sure) in a process of consolidation as an authoritarian or totalitarian world superpower (to which Xi Jinping's strong concentration of power could be leading). Somehow, democracies get along better with other democracies, and this seems to be increasingly the case in times of advancing globalization. The greater distribution of power and the stronger pressure of public opinion lead democratic states to adopt patterns of behavior oriented towards a broader and more general interest, which makes cooperation between them easier, more sustainable and more effective. Although, as mentioned above, the internal political regime of each state is not the only factor conditioning its external conduct, in times of globalization this seems to be accentuated.²¹⁴

The BRICS development bank has been singled out as an initiative worthy of analysis in terms of its potential to foster a power structure parallel to that of the US-led liberal democracies (Gonzalez, 2015). While it is true that such an initiative, by itself, does not seem to do more than add a new element to the already existing global structure, the truth is that it involves a certain challenge to the U.S. leadership by China.²¹⁵

However, as time goes by, the BRICS are far from having long-term lines of action that can be perceived as structurally related or complementary. Synthesizing and integrating what has been mentioned throughout this text, the main limitations and challenges of the BRICS (both domestic and systemic) include, in tentative order of importance: i) Political systems of a different nature (with Brazil, South Africa and India consolidating democracy and Russia and China consolidating authoritarianism), ii) Difference in weight or influence on the international chessboard (especially the probable rise of China as a world superpower); iii) Internal rivalries (mainly between India and China, and in the future the rivalry between Russia and China could be added if the former does not adopt a pragmatic stance in relation to the rise of China). iv) Growing difficulty in using the category of South-South cooperation as a discursive mechanism to legitimize and promote the cooperation carried out by the

²¹⁴ MICHELETTI, Rafael Eduardo. *Perspectives and challenges of the BRICS (and IBSA) as a South-South cooperation group*. Ob. Cit. Pp. 58- 59.

²¹⁵ MICHELETTI, Rafael Eduardo. *Perspectives and challenges of the BRICS (and IBSA) as a South-South cooperation group*. Ob. Cit. P. 60

BRICS; v) Trade divergences (WTO); vi) Dissonances on environmental issues (although lessened after the Paris Agreement); and vii) Dissimilar nuclear status.²¹⁶

In the articulation between political discourse and praxis, in relation to the concept of South-South cooperation, there has been no overcoming of the systematic prioritization of national interest. Perhaps the most significant challenge that the South-South concept will face is the interpretation that each of the participants makes of their respective national interests. All nations define the objective of their foreign policy as the protection of their national interest. The question is: to what extent can a narrow conception of national interests hinder South-South relations? Clearly, participating nations will have to broaden their understanding of national interests in order to build the foundations of South-South dialogue on concrete realities.²¹⁷

The new BRICS brings together immense human and natural resources, and their diverse socio-political approaches will make it difficult to unify them. Russia and Iran are problematic countries, one for its invasion of its Ukrainian neighbor and the other for its Taliban regime that cruelly assaults its population as well as its neighbors such as Pakistan.²¹⁸

The various territorial disputes between partner states are one of the tasks to be resolved by the bloc. First, there are the long-standing disputes between the two Asian giants, China and India, over the Kashmir region and Arunachal Pradesh. The new African members, Ethiopia and Egypt, have a dispute over the Great Renaissance Dam on the middle reaches of the Nile River. We must also not forget the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.²¹⁹

On the other hand, there are disagreements about the strategies or approaches that BRICS+ members have towards the alliance. On the one hand, Russia seeks to restore its power as a commercial and territorial power. Beijing seeks to weave a network of alliances strong enough to destroy the dominance established by the United States. India and Brazil are seeking a neutral position on the global stage, which is why the foreign ministries of New Delhi and Brasilia are emphasizing the strengthening of the group as a means of developing

²¹⁶ MICHELETTI, Rafael Eduardo. *Perspectives and challenges of the BRICS (and IBSA) as a South-South cooperation group*. Ob. Cit. Pp. 63- 64.

²¹⁷ MICHELETTI, Rafael Eduardo. *Perspectives and challenges of the BRICS (and IBSA) as a South-South cooperation group*. Ob. Cit. PP. 64- 65.

²¹⁸ FAESLER CARLISLE, Julio. *The challenge of the BRICS*. Ob. Cit.

²¹⁹ MONTERO CIRILO, Javier. *The BRICS+ and the challenges of an expanded alliance*. Online, retrieved on date 18/09/2024, available at: <https://blog.idee.ceu.es/2024/04/10/los-brics-y-los-desafios-de-una-alianza-ampliada/>. Madrid, 2024.

mutual infrastructures. Cooperation with the United States could become a bone of contention. The accession of its bitter enemy Iran, along with other countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which have security assistance agreements, could lead to future negative synergies within the organization.²²⁰

ANALYSIS

In the context of a progressive and indeterminate reconfiguration of the international order and of power relations within it, the BRICS+ constitute a space whose contours are evolving and which today attracts and groups together a growing number of countries of the South (from Latin America, Africa and Asia) forced to navigate the increasingly turbulent currents in the international arena, produced by the evolution of growing tensions and systemic rivalries between China and the United States. In a world where no single power, or group of powers, can exercise leadership capable of imposing its balances on all, each country is developing transactional and pragmatic strategies aimed primarily at reinforcing its immediate interests and gaining autonomy. In this context, for these countries, joining or approaching BRICS+ responds less to a logic of adherence to a predetermined ideological camp than to the search for a diversification of partnerships and alliances aimed at reducing economic, political and strategic dependencies that are too strong or exclusive vis-à-vis the two rival powers of the 21st century. It is therefore the nature, intensity and evolution of this systemic rivalry that will significantly determine the future forms and paths of the BRICS+.²²¹

The BRICS partnership inaugurates a new phase of pragmatism that heralds a new world order. The UN is the reference and essential factor for world peace and progress, where multilateralism is the instrument that stops the impositions of the powerful. There are other even more urgent issues to be solved. In September 2023, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, declared that the world is fractured by war, climate change and persistent inequality. The UN chief's call was to take action in the face of humanity's greatest challenges and to present their own assessments in the most global of scenarios. There is no more time to lose. However, the problems concerning international balances are being decided by the countries wielding decisive influence in world affairs. This does not spare us

²²⁰ MONTERO CIRILO, Javier. *The BRICS+ and the challenges of an expanded alliance*. Ob. Cit.

²²¹ INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES. *BRICS+: Towards a more multipolar world*. Ob. Cit. P. 5.

from suffering the consequences. From a group that only sought to reinforce its particular development plans in solidarity, the BRICS now pretends to change the whole world. The PAN must have its response ready.²²²

On the other hand, it is clear that while technology, investment and trade will be important issues on the table, one of the cornerstones of the discussion between the strongest economies and the BRICS countries could be bridging the gap on their interests in environmental issues and setting priorities.

However, BRICS enlargement also poses internal challenges that could affect the cohesion of the bloc in the future, ranging from territorial conflicts to strategic differences.²²³

CONCLUSIONS

The BRICS lights must be assumed as a catalyst that seeks empathetic rapprochement. However, such inclusion should not only be considered for the members, but also for the new ones. This, with the understanding that the interests of its powerful members will not necessarily be those of the new members. Thus, joining the BRICS does not imply signing an adhesion contract or a blank check.

The shadows and challenges of the BRICS constitute points of urgent pending agenda, in order to make their consolidation and preponderance viable. While it is true that the expansion of the BRICS membership was embraced in response to the different interests within the group, such expansion poses challenges within the group, such as territorial conflicts, strategic differences, among others. Such expansion poses challenges within the group, such as territorial conflicts, strategic differences, among others; these challenges could end up destabilizing the BRICS. Ergo, the growth of the BRICS must be understood as a matter of substance and legitimacy, rather than a mere increase in the number of members.

The indicated reconfiguration of the BRICS towards a new world order requires caution, attention and reflection. The global and country-specific agendas must prevail over those of the BRICS.

²²² FAESLER CARLISLE, Julio. *The BRICS challenge*. Ob. Cit.

²²³ MONTERO CIRILO, Javier. BRICS+ and the challenges of an expanded partnership. Ob. Cit.

SUGGESTIONS

The BRICS need to understand that their auspicious scenario must be understood in a responsible manner, establishing bridges of debate and understanding, in order to land in the common interests of its members.

The attention to the shadows and challenges of the BRICS must be assumed as part of the interests of all members.

The eventual establishment of a new world order must be assumed observing the international balances and rights of the countries of the world, whether they belong to the BRICS or not.

Establish and attend to the essential and urgent points of the global agenda.