

BRICS AND THE GEO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF ENGINEERING A NEW GLOBAL ORDER

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In the geopolitics of 21st-century international relations, there is a noticeable shift and transformation of the global order away from the Western-centric United States unipolar order (Global North) towards a Non-Western multipolar order (Global South). Key actors in the Global South have increasingly stood in opposition to the excesses of the Global North's words and deeds. However, standing in opposition to something does not change the status quo, the hegemonic power remains, and the challengers remain just that. Building durable institutions, that are based on the symmetry of relations and outcomes, is necessary. This is what BRICS represents, where it is evolving to enable better and support the creation of a new world geopolitical order.

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Twenty-first-century international relations are rapidly changing as the geopolitical balance of power increasingly shifts. As a topic, this can be interpreted and analyzed from a theoretical perspective or a pragmatic perspective. Geopolitics in its practical and operational sense concerns managing and regulating the balance of power and influence.¹ Geo-economics as a subset supports and facilitates geopolitical goals and ambitions. These elements become crucial to understand and operationalize within the context of the relative decline of the Western-centric United States unipolar order (Global North) and the relative rise of the Non-Western multipolar order (Global South).² The current state of international affairs is that the old order has not disappeared, and the new order is in the process of consolidating. Thus, the transformation is not yet finalised or completed.

This present article seeks to lay out and understand the geo-economic imperatives of a geopolitical shift in power and influence. Understanding the geo-economics of this specific moment in the history of international relations requires an accurate understanding and definition of geopolitical transformations and their impact to establish the recent environmental context. Once this is established, BRICS will be a challenger to the geo-economic institutional structure. When a geopolitical order challenges for hegemony, they must go beyond an oppositional stance in their words and deeds. They need to offer an alternative vision of global relations and interactions that is superior to the existing model, which can be achieved through a viable and resilient geo-economic vision such as BRICS.

Geo-economics and its Relations to Geopolitics

At its simplistic and basic level of academic definition, geopolitics as “the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage.”³ In essence, it is the deployment of strategy in the regulation and the management of the balance of power and influence by actors in international relations. However, geopolitics is a form of interpretive knowledge, but it is very far from being ‘objective’ or neutral owing to its highly situational nature. “Geopolitics is a form of situated knowledge, neither a socially neutral nor a politically innocent form of understanding, but one deeply marked by who is using it, when, and for what purposes. It is a form of knowledge created by specific people at certain times for particular purposes.”⁴ This forms the grand vision of the actor towards power relations in international relations, whether they be a hegemon, challenger, niche, support role, or neutral.

1) John Rennie Short, *Geopolitics: Making Sense of a Changing World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

2) Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit From Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

3) Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2017): p.36.

4) John Rennie Short (2022): p. 3.

Geo-economics is linked and interacting with geopolitics, which is not a single approach but different ideas that share the belief that economic conditions precipitate political events. This could be an invasion of another country, where powerful countries exploit weaker ones and are forced to react by creating trade and financial relations terms. It is a means of interpretation of human geography where, for example, economic activity creates changes.⁵ Competition for relative power tends to drive state behaviour, whereas geo-economics is the interplay between economics and politics in the global arena, and economic forces and considerations mould political decisions. The focus of geo-economics is rather narrow and homes in on the accumulation of economic power from a geographical and strategic viewpoint.⁶ “The asymmetric vulnerabilities and dependencies inherited to this international system make economic power a potent means to pursue strategic objectives.”⁷ Therefore, geo-economics plays a subordinate and supportive role to international actors' geopolitical aims and objectives.

The Contemporary Transformation of the Global Order

As the 21st century has progressed, the elements sustaining the Global North's (Western-centric U.S. unipolar order) hegemony, namely military and economic supremacy as well as the dominance of Western liberal politics, have come under increasing pressure and threat. This is partly owing to an internal ideological identity and culture war, but also through arrogant and self-destructive foreign and security policy. The current consequences of these have been the Global North's relative decline and the Global South's relative ascendancy (Non-Western multipolar order).⁸ It is a trend and process in international relations that the U.S. has sought to halt by any means to preserve its hegemonic status and privileged position.⁹ Therefore, it is in the interests and security of actors maintaining a challenger or neutral stance in international relations to preserve their ability to subject and not object of the current iteration of 21st-century geopolitics.

One way to attempt to preserve what is left of the Global North's hegemony is using economic warfare, which was successful in history at containing other powers. Economic warfare falls within the realm of geo-economics, which in turn, is a subset

5) Colin Flint (2017): p. 6-7.

6) Sören Scholvin and Mikael Wigell, "Power Politics by Economic Means: Geoeconomics as an Analytical Approach and Foreign Policy Practice," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 37, No.1 (2018): p. 73-84, DOI: [10.1080/01495933.2018.1419729](https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1419729)

7) Sören Scholvin and Mikael Wigell (2018): p. 81.

8) Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015); Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Greg Simons, "West Versus Non-West: A New Cold War?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ), Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023).

9) Greg Simons, "Brzezinski's Geostrategic Imperatives in a Transforming Global Order," *Geostrategic Pulse*, No. 287 (December 2022): p. 25-27.

of geopolitics. Consequently, actors that feel actual or potential threat by this means logically seek to hedge, mitigate or shield themselves from the consequences of possible effects. One of the means of maintaining the subject and not object status when pursuing self-interest and security by the elements of the Global South has been to create new sets of foreign and security relations with other countries from the Global South. Russia, in the 21st century has been actively engaged in reconfiguring its foreign relations focus as tensions continue to grow with the Global North towards a focus on the Global South – politically, culturally, diplomatically, economically, and militarily.¹⁰ There are also more geo-economically informed responses to the threats and opportunities present in transforming global order.

Many countries have also sought to cushion themselves against the very likely economic warfare to be waged against them, which has seen an increasing cross-section of the Global South, such as China, Saudi Arabia and Russia seeking to reduce their vulnerabilities and means of being economically (and politically) manipulated and coerced. Russia has been leading the way at this stage in securing their ability to remain in opposition to the Global North by engaging in and encouraging others in the process of de-dollarization.¹¹ There are also geo-economic attempts to create credible and viable alternatives to the unequal terms and conditions offered by the Global North, such as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is seen as a significant threat to the Global North's continued global hegemony.¹² The rapidly expanding geo-economic project of the Global South known as BRICS, which can be seen as a much collective variation of the BRI, which started small initially and was consequently mocked, but is in the process of rapid expansion in light of the increasing level of coercion by the U.S. towards friend and foe alike.

When challenging a hegemonic power for their position, if the challenger merely rhetorically and in policy opposes the hegemon, then they are likely to remain as a challenger in opposition and beyond taking that power. In essence, they play a role of disruption and irritation to the hegemon and their hold on power. To overthrow a hegemon and to take its place requires the challenger to additionally offer a qualitatively better and more attractive alternative to the hegemon. Furthermore, words, deeds and outcomes must match. To create a successful challenger that can challenge and become a hegemon requires innovative and insightful leaders with vision. However, this is merely the initial step. To consolidate their position requires the creation of a viable geo-economic organizational culture, identity and outlook as well as a durable and resilient institutional structure that can regulate and manage the

10) Andrey Baykov and Tatiana Shakleina (Eds.), *Polycentric World Order in the Making* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan (2023).

11) Xu Wenhong, "Dedollarization as a Direction of Russia's Financial Policy in Current Conditions," *Studies on Russian Economic Development*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2023): p. 9-18.

12) Peng Jiang, *Geostrategic Psychology and the Rise of Forbearance* (London: Routledge, 2023).

weaknesses and threats to be encountered.

BRICS: The Birth of an Idea and Vision for the Future

When the concept and ambitions of the BRICS vision were announced, it was ridiculed for some time as being incapable of offering the same terms and conditions as offered by the Global North, despite the obvious potential and resonance in the promise of bringing greater parity and equality for actors of the Global South in their economic relations. BRICS has created a significant innovation in global governance by bringing together, at first glance, very different countries with little in common.¹³ The first BRICS meeting occurred in July 2006 at Russia's initiative, which was done on the margins of the then G8 group. The stated focus being on finance, trade, and development. In June 2009, the first BRICS summit was held, where a joint document and declaration on the purpose and goals of BRICS was given. "To promote dialogue and cooperation among our countries in an incremental, proactive, pragmatic, open and transparent way. The dialogue and cooperation of the BRIC countries are conducive not only to serving common interests of emerging market economies and developing countries, but also to building a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity."¹⁴ During the 14th BRICS summit in China in 2022, China noted that "the influence of BRICS cooperation has gone beyond the five countries and become a constructive force for boosting world economic growth, improving global governance and promoting democracy in international relations."¹⁵ The articulated narratives of the idea and vision for BRICS include a more symmetrical political hierarchy and tangible outcomes as well as a more reciprocal and inclusive process oriented towards pragmatism in international relations and securing national interests. This is a very attractive alternative offer to the less optimal hegemonic dictates, where this geo-economics supports building a community of Global South to secure a more stable economic future, within the context of a global geopolitical transformation that creates an environment of uncertainty and risk.

Over time and with the development of the BRICS organizational focus, three pillars of issues and activities have clearly emerged, these are: political and security matters; economic and financial concerns, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. By 2019, BRICS accounted for 41 percent of the world's population, 24 percent of the global GDP, and over 16 percent share of world trade.¹⁶ BRICS is in the process of

13) Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with BRICs: The path to 2050," Global Economics Paper 99 (2003): p. 1-24. Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

14) Infobrics, "History of BRICS," Info BRICS, <https://infobrics.org/page/history-of-brics/> (11 February 2024).

15) BRICS China 2022, "BRICS countries," XIV BRICS Summit, www.brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/gyjzgj/jzgjij/ (11 February 2024).

16) BRICS India 2021, "Evolution of BRICS," BRICS India 2021, 11 February 2024.

expansion as an organisation, which may create additional issues on matters that require consensus, but it demonstrates the relative attractiveness of the BRICS idea and promise concerning the increasingly aggressive and unpredictable reactions of the declining Global North.

The newly elected leader of Argentina, President Javier Milei, chose to withdraw the decision to join BRICS in December 2023, instead aligning to become an object of events by the Global North. His presidency is being wracked by political and economic strife and may serve as a helpful illustration of what happens to contemporary objects of international relations. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have joined BRICS in 2024. This increase in membership has increased the proportion of the global population to 45 percent and the share of the global economy to 28 percent.¹⁷ Therefore, BRICS is transforming from what was initially thought of as being a non-viable and non-serious challenge to the Global North's economic hegemony towards something increasingly seen as an emerging threat to that hegemony.

BRICS: The Influence of Personalities Versus Institutional Structure

The initial mental work that helped to realise the Global South's vision, ambitions and goals for a new global economic and political order originated from the dialogue and the work of the political leadership of the BRICS countries. They are instrumental in creating and establishing the innovative intellectual foundations of this ambitious geo-economic project. A project that was created out of necessity was born in the chaos of increasing competition and conflict generated by the transforming global order. This process was seemingly assisted by countries and leaders who shared similar outlooks and values through their specific forms and sets of social and cultural conservatism that oppose the fundamentals of the ideologically driven agenda of woke Western liberalism.¹⁸ Political leadership in BRICS is tied to political leadership at the home of each member state, which has somewhat hinged upon the long-term survival of key political leaders such as Putin, Modi, Xi and so forth.¹⁹ Political leadership, vision and innovation are needed to establish the organization's vision and approach. This is a strength, but it is also potentially a political weakness if the Global North engages in political warfare against those leaders and successfully instills regime change, as

<https://brics2021.gov.in/about-brics>

17) BBC, "Brics: What is the Group and Which Countries Have Joined?" 11 February 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-66525474>

18) Greg Simons, "Role of Social Media in Amplifying Neo-Liberal Cancel Culture," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ), Vol. 20, No. 3 (2021): p. 71-79.

19) Cintia Quiliconi, Marcelo Saguier and Diana Tussie, "BRICS: Leadership in the making," Documento de trabajo N°71, Área de Relaciones Internacionales, *FLACSO* (Argentina), https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/36553/CONICET_Digital_Nro.4a41898a-f189-4687-86c8-900ffa125b40_A.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y (August 2014).

the recent case of Argentina demonstrates.

However, to create a more resilient and durable organization that will long outlive its creators requires going beyond the personalities and capabilities of the respective political leadership of the countries involved. Institutional structures need to be established and developed, with the vision to increase the organization's capability and capacity and enhance its resilience and durability.

New multilateral financial institutions have emerged to support infrastructure projects globally, including the Silk Road Fund, the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These institutions aim to raise additional liquidity for infrastructure development worldwide, offering alternatives to traditional financial mechanisms.²⁰

The institutional and organizational structure are intended to increase the level of environmental predictability, plus expanding capability and capacity in terms of the regulation and management of operational matters and considerations. Political personalities' role and effect on an organization should not be perceived or regarded as being something separate from the institutional structure. Rather, these elements should be understood as being complementary to one another and mutually interactive, the result of the combined effects being greater than their individual parts. The political success of BRICS can be measured in the assessments regarding whom they are geo-economically competing. Therefore, the recent expansion of BRICS is seen and understood in the context of the relative context of BRICS success as representing a defeat for U.S. global leadership.²¹

BRICS: The Future Prospects

The Global North under U.S. leadership has lost its absolute hegemony in the 21st century, they seek to keep their relative hegemony. But this is being done under the most trying and difficult of circumstances, many of which have been self-inflicted through poor profoundly asymmetrical foreign and security policy. Rather than working with powers of the rising Global South, the U.S. has chosen a path of obstructing their rise to retain some relative hegemony.²² This is increasingly difficult to achieve as the political, economic, military, and diplomatic capability and capacity is in decline. This leaves all countries, regardless of being perceived as ally or foe

20) Nivedita Das Kundu, "BRICS and the Political Economy of the New World Order", *Valdai Club*, 29 June 2023. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/brics-and-the-political-economy-of-the-new-world/>

21) The Editorial Board, "A bigger BRICS marks a failure of US leadership," *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-08-29/a-bigger-brics-marks-a-failure-of-us-leadership>

22) Greg Simons, "International Relations in the Age of US Decline: Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 August 2021. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/>

of the U.S. the choice or decision, to be subjects or objects of international relations. The spectacular example of the deindustrialization of Europe during the Ukraine War is no better example of what can happen to objects of events.²³ A new global order is in the making, but the old order has not ended, and the new order is not yet firmly established.

BRICS opposes the unequal political and economic terms and conditions imposed by the Global North. This pattern has lasted some 500 years of Western global hegemony. The trend of the relative decline of the Global North in the last decades has exposed their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, but also the determination to retain the asymmetrical status quo in the distribution of power and influence in the geopolitics of 21st-century international relations. Therefore, BRICS is a well-conceived and well timed geo-economic program to support the geopolitical goal of challenging the hegemonic power. It enables different powers from the Global South to hedge their weaknesses and threats to remain a subject and not an object of events in international relations.

Conclusion

BRICS has risen from global obscurity to global prominence in a concise space of time. It emerged from the need to create a viable geo-economic organizational means of standing in opposition to the Global North's excesses by key Global South players. Its relevance and significance are likely to continue to grow within the context of the transforming global geopolitical order and the reaction of the U.S. to preserve its global hegemony by coercing into conforming other countries that is against their interests as subjects, and not to be forced into being objects. The primary value of BRICS is that it represents more than just an organization that stands in opposition to something. Still, instead it is also an offer that is seemingly qualitatively more attractive than what is offered by the Global North with a more reciprocal and relational approach and more symmetrical outcomes.

23) Matthew Karnitschnig, "Rustbelt on the Rhine," *Politico*, 13 July 2023.
<https://www.politico.eu/article/rust-belt-on-the-rhine-the-deindustrialization-of-germany/>