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### BRICS Studies: Some Suggested Themes



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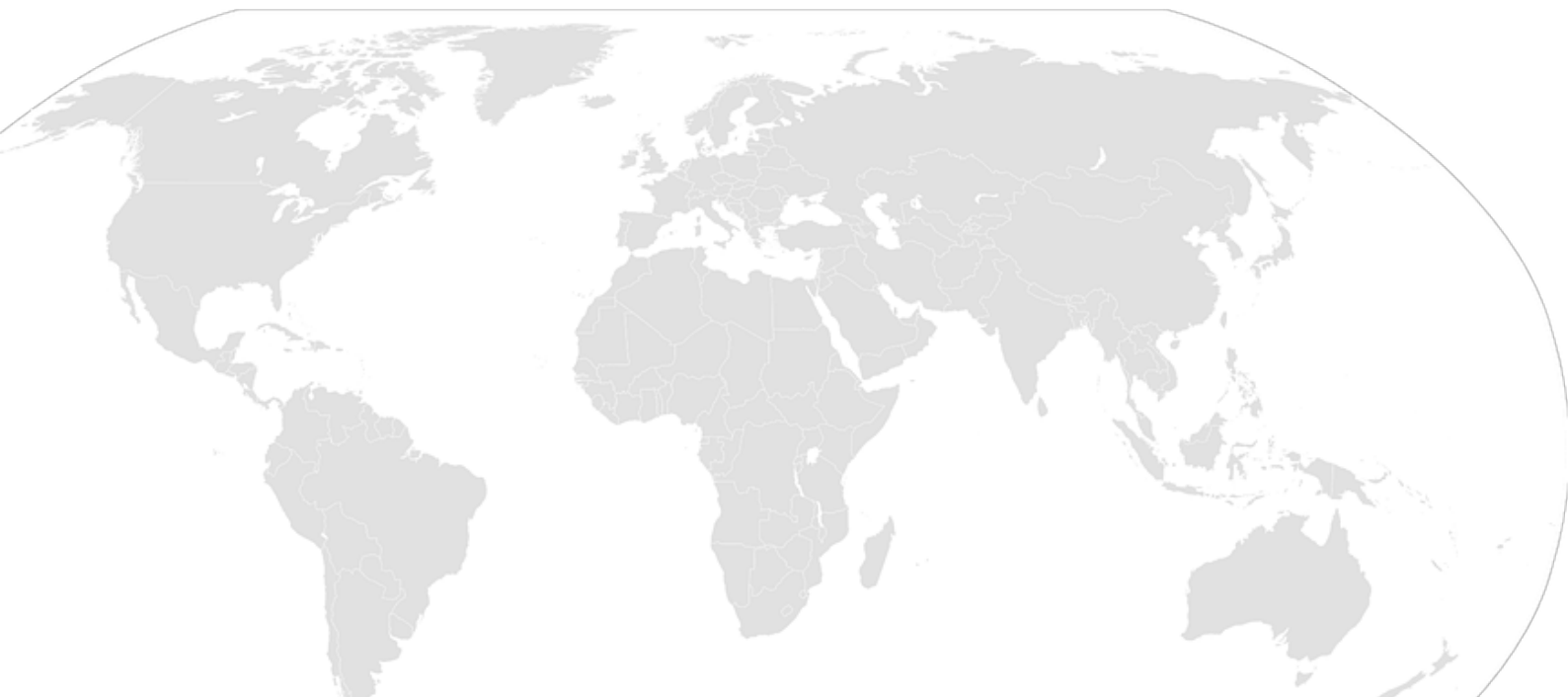
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**Cover: Leaders of BRICS countries prior to the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, in September 2016. From left to right are Brazilian President Michel Temer, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and South African President Jacob Zuma.**



## Introduction

Developing interdisciplinary policy studies focusing on Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) can be considered a natural spin-off of the annual BRICS summitry, inclusive of the think tanks, academic forums, and symposia forming part of the build-up to the heads-of-state event.

What follows is an extrapolation of themes as a basis for considering why BRICS warrants its own identity as a field of study, and what that might constitute. The suggested themes are presented as four illustrative modules, indicative of how an academic and/or policy agenda might be constructed. The proposed modules fall into two subcategories: strategic studies and functional studies. The focus of this exercise is on strategic studies as the overarching conceptual framework for BRICS Studies. It concludes with a selected listing of illustrative resources as an analytical base for BRICS studies development.

This document is not intended to be a definitive statement about BRICS or BRICS Studies but purely as one contribution to a wider and more extensive investigation into that topic, its prospects, and where it might lead. Hopefully, among other outcomes, it will help to elevate discourses about BRICS in a way that will liberate them from dubious, politically inspired ideological projects and agendas that have no substantial link with BRICS as a historical phenomenon and a fruitful field of study.

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## Laying the BRICS of a New Global Order

Why BRICS Studies? In seeking to answer that question, it is first necessary to discard the almost obligatory but dubious credit given to Goldman Sachs for coining the acronym 'BRIC'. Goldman did so to describe a much broader emerging market investment promotion trend that had taken hold prior to the global financial meltdown at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Goldman Sachs has since spawned numerous other acronyms, none of which is especially helpful in illuminating the changing geopolitical economy, apart from tickling the speculative curiosity of the elite investment community. In the Goldman Sachs schema, BRIC was a fashionable construct that could provide an avenue for investors in search of profitable investment opportunities, especially in light of the historically low policy interest rates in the advanced industrial world. How has Goldman Sachs been discarded regarding the BRIC acronym?

More informatively, especially once BRIC became BRICS with the addition of South Africa, was the global geopolitical-economic impetus that brought the initial quartet together as a grouping intent on reshaping the international political landscape in order to accommodate their individual and collective agendas in a changing global economy. There is also the important dimension of the commercial diplomacy of the BRICS countries on the African continent as part of pursuing their national economic interests. Taken together, those motivations reflected the emergence of a new dynamic in international politics. The emergence of BRICS became especially important in view of persisting inequalities and uneven development in the global system, the skewed decision-making processes of the global governance institutions, global trade rules weighted in favour of advanced industrial economies, and challenges related to development, particularly infrastructure development, in various parts of the developing world.

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**The first objective of the BRICS countries is to make those leading international organisations receptive to different voices and influences**

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The BRICS countries have very little in common in cultural, political, geographic or linguistic terms.<sup>1</sup> However, informal groups such as the BRICS provide a new way of reimagining global governance, especially in an era when the pillars of post-World War 2 multilateralism seem shaky, when global insecurities and uncertainties are multiplying, and when global governance institutions are in need of renewal. The rise of the BRICS represents a challenge to the Western dominated global order, even though that grouping does not have as its immediate objective the intention of overhauling the fundamentals of the contemporary global system. The first objective of the BRICS countries is to make those leading international organisations receptive to different voices and influences.<sup>2</sup> In any case, international organisations are social constructs, and their members hardly converge in order to share geographic or linguistic affinities. The G7/8 is not a homogeneous entity, and its members have [1]different approaches to governance or economic policy even though they broadly share a liberal internationalist commitment. The policy and normative elements around which they converge are an outcome of a deliberative process rather than a given. So it is with the BRICS. In saying that, we are not suggesting that the structural expression of the BRICS is fixed permanently, but that the process in terms of which that agency has evolved and how it has positioned itself to respond to global governance deficiencies and developmental challenges is worthy of close examination.

BRICS has sought to depart from the global agenda-setting dominance of the developed northern industrial West (including Japan). It has done so by raising issues of democratic deficits in international financial institutions, including the fact that the headship of those organisations is carved up between the United



States and Europe in ways that depart from accepted norms of transparency and meritocracy. In more recent times, BRICS have also articulated a more comprehensive reform agenda targeted at the United Nations. More concretely, the BRICS countries have put together an infrastructure financing mechanism in the form of a new Development Bank. Those and other developments require critical study, especially to understand the ways in which new international regimes are emerging, how power and authority are being redistributed in ways that could change our understanding of global governance and meanings of global leadership, and how countries that historically were on the margins of the global economy are asserting themselves and staking their claims in global decision-making processes. We are not uncritically accepting the notion of BRICS as a new hegemonic structure and an alternative to the Western-dominated global order but believe it is worth studying; casts new light on global governance and leadership, and is a reality that cannot be ignored. For that reason, we advance a position that dedicated BRICS Studies should be promoted.

There are, indeed, a number of weaknesses in the configuration of BRICS, and how they are asserting themselves geopolitically. Without pre-empting elements of what would constitute a BRICS Studies agenda, some of those weaknesses are worth mentioning. The first is the normative weaknesses within the group, especially the fact that the group have not yet developed a shared intellectual outlook. They still do not seem to have a coherent set of values and an intellectual framework that aims to replace or supersede the liberal internationalist order. For example, China seems to be appropriating the vacuum left

*Preparations for a BRICS summit in Ufa, Russia, in 2015.*

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by the US in order to project itself as a new champion of liberal trade and open markets, since globalisation favours its production structure. Second, BRICS countries are yet to develop soft power resources or powers of attraction that could draw other countries into their orbit. Knowledge and ideas are crucial power resources that enable countries to exercise mastery over how the institutions and norms that underpin the structures of global political economy are scripted. It does not appear that BRICS have developed that sufficiently. Take the World Bank, for example. That institution has evolved beyond just serving as a lending organisation towards assuming an identity as a knowledge bank in its dealings with middle-income countries.

The new development bank of BRICS has yet to develop such confidence and capacities. While it has begun to extend loans, that pales into insignificance when compared with the resources at the disposal of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Whenever advanced industrial economies project their power and influence, they do so through structures that diffuse norms, ideas, and knowledge – the essence of hegemony. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is another example of a ‘think tank’ that promotes the global spread of norms that are essentially scripted by advanced industrial economies and conform to their world views.

Finally, BRICS has not yet gained the confidence of other developing countries, especially African countries. There is still a trust deficit between the BRICS countries and others on the margins of the global order. There have been tentative attempts to close that gap. In addition to the main BRICS eThekweni Summit agenda, there was also a special retreat for BRICS leaders and select African leaders under the theme ‘Unlocking Africa’s Potential: BRICS and Africa Cooperation on Infrastructure’. More specifically, the declaration highlighted the need for increased support for the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA); the African Union Action Plan 2010–2015; the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) Presidential Infrastructure Championing Initiative, and the Regional Infrastructure Master Plans.

All of those factors reinforce the need to study BRICS much more closely and understand the ways in which that group is contesting the key structures of power: trade, production, finance, and knowledge.

Furthermore, in the current uncertain and risky global environment, there is also a need to study the geopolitical positioning of BRICS as a group as well as individual BRICS countries in their own regions and in relation to other volatile

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*An installation at the BRICS Leaders Summit held in Goa, India, in October 2016.*

areas around the world, such as Syria, Ukraine and Turkey. Crucially, we also need to study the BRICS approach to multilateralism and multipolarity beyond the classical Great Power paradigm, although major regional powers are the main drivers of regionalisation as they set about navigating an integrated global economy. The United States is withdrawing from its historical global leadership role, preferring an inward-looking approach and a selective foreign policy posture; and Europe has suffered heavy blows in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, as well as the crisis of confidence expressed in the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and Brexit. That does not suggest that BRICS will step into the breach, but that the face of global leadership as we know it is changing, and BRICS could be part of the solution in reconfiguring global governance.

With the global order becoming more fluid and rapidly moving away from Euro-American Western hegemony as the global economic centre of gravity, it would be a major omission not to establish an interdisciplinary platform that looks at the patterns of relationship among the BRICS countries and between BRICS and the current global order. It is clear that power is shifting from West to East towards the greater Asian Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the Indian Ocean Rim and the East Asian-Pacific. How do they square out? That has been accompanied by a southern shift centring on Brazil and South Africa, with the latter the most developed (if not the largest) economy on an African continent that has also seen major surges in economic growth rates (though not in South Africa). That shift also extends from West to East, from the South American 'Southern Cone' along the South Atlantic to the Indian Ocean Rim and the South East Asian-Pacific.

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**The study of BRICS as a transitional geopolitical-economic suborder within the overall G20 international order allows an analysis of global transition as a multipolar process of power dispersal towards new and alternative centres of power**

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**The South African government, through the AU, should spell out the strategic relevance of its membership of the BRICS grouping.**

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That southerly complement to the West-to-East shift has given rise to references to an emerging 'Global South' as a general reflection of 'emerging powers' or markets falling outside the Western-industrial 'Global North.' Since the IBSA countries within BRICS – India-Brazil-South Africa – represent identifiable regional nodes linking the southerly West-to-East South Atlantic-Indian Ocean geography, those countries are well-placed within BRICS to lend that minilateral grouping the Global South dimension of its identity (although India falls within the Northern Hemisphere on the cusp of the South as the centre of South Asia).

BRICS serves, therefore, as a convenient proxy for trying to understand those West-to-East/North-to-South dynamics in an international system that has evolved from cold war bipolarity to multipolarity while globally reflecting varying degrees of uni-multipolarity (Huntington) as opposed to outright 'unipolarity' as is commonly but incorrectly alluded to as a function of applying the 'hyper-power' label to the United States.<sup>iii</sup> The upshot of those dynamics might be likened to the taxonomic evolution of two suborders comprising different families within an order of fauna and flora. In this case: a Euro-American suborder of the G7 and Allied States led by the United States and a more loosely aligned and primarily Eurasian-Sino-Russian-led BRICS suborder.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

The study of BRICS as a transitional geopolitical-economic suborder within the overall G20 international order allows an analysis of global transition as a multipolar process of power dispersal towards new and alternative centres of power outside of the Western-aligned Euro-American suborder. As such, BRICS is essentially about the redistribution of geo-economic power and momentum in leveraging geopolitical clout accompanying that process, including the reconfiguring of the global strategic landscape, carrying with it major implications for global governance dynamics.

The BRICS Studies agenda, therefore, should consider the following recommendations:

- The South African Government should consider revising the curriculum, beginning at the formative stages. The South African Government should clearly highlight the envisaged achievements so that BRICS Studies do not appear reactive to the global power configuration.



- The South African government, through the AU, should spell out the strategic relevance of its membership of the BRICS grouping.
- Institutions of higher learning in Africa should input decision-making at the AU level to synergise Africa's agency.
- South Africa and, by extension, Africa's affiliation with the BRICS grouping need not be ideological, but should rather be based on strategic interests.
- The new BRICS Bank should desist from exploitative lending regimes associated with the Bretton Woods Institutions that have contributed to Africa's economic stagnation.

## Endnotes

1. El-Elrhan A. Mohamed, *The Only Game in Town*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 104.

2. See Mzukisi Qobo and Mills Soko, 'The Rise of Emerging Powers in the Global Finance Architecture: The Case of the BRICS and the New Development Bank', *South African Journal of International of International Affairs*, Volume 22(3), 2015.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Lonely Superpower', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2, March/April 1999.

# NOTES

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