

THE BRICS PAVE THE WAY

By Dmitri Trenin

When the BRIC group (as it was known then) first emerged, it was greeted with amusement: another exotic variety of an alphabet soup in the age of globalization. As it turned into a more permanent fixture, it was regarded as a poor man's version of a global club, a humble answer to the G7. More recently, it has come to be feared, not least by U.S. President Donald Trump, as a potential threat to the dominance of the U.S. dollar. In the run-up to the 2026 BRICS summit in New Delhi, the Western media's focus shifted to the divergencies within the group, essentially seeking to portray it as something less than the sum of its parts. All these misinterpretations fail to recognize the actual significance of BRICS as an early model of the emerging multipolar order.

Over the past five centuries or so – roughly the period of the global hegemony of the West – the world order was invariably based on the dominance of a single power (Spain, France, Britain, or America) or a combination of powers (the Concert of Europe, the U.S.-Soviet bipolarity). Today, single-power hegemony is still very much alive and well in the West, whether one looks at NATO, AUCUS, the international financial institutions or multiple Washington-led alliances in Asia and elsewhere. True, the European Union does not exactly fit the bill, but it has NATO as its bedrock, and its members maintain strong – and unequal – relations with the United States. What keeps them together is not merely geopolitics and geoeconomics. They largely share a broadly similar worldview, even though liberal and conservative versions of that worldview may occasionally clash rather vehemently. Taken together, however, they represent the Western civilization – with a handful of associates.

BRICS is a very different creature. Its ten members are not only countries of very different caliber in terms of population size, territorial dimension, GDP volume, military, technological and science power, and the like. Their histories are not as closely intertwined as those of Europe and North America. Their political systems are highly diverse; their policies – domestic and foreign – point in different directions. Most fundamentally, they represent several great civilizations: Chinese/Confucian, Indian/Hindu, Islamic/Persian/Arab, Latin American, African, and Russian. In this way, they are anything but like-minded, but they reflect the nature of humankind.

What BRICS obviously lacks is a leader. China, with its 1.5 billion people the world's biggest economy (in PPP terms) and a world leader in advanced technology, is not the group's boss. Certainly it is not Russia, the world's fourth largest (again, in PPP terms) economy and a nuclear superpower alongside the United States. Despite the fact that NATO is waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, Moscow does not attempt to turn BRICS into an anti-Western bloc. As for India, the third leading economic power that has also just replaced China as the most populous country on earth, it maintains close ties with America and Europe while preserving and developing its historical links to Russia, and being wary of China. Iran and the United Arab Emirates find themselves on the opposite sides in the ongoing war that America and Israel have launched against Iran.

Yet, the group is not unraveling. China's president Xi Jinping has traveled to the Delhi summit, his first visit to India in seven years. Beijing clearly does not want to give Washington a chance to use the existing problems in the Sino-Indian relations to stoke tension between Asia's two great powers. Even as it lashes out against U.S. bases in the region, Iran seeks to reach out to its Arab neighbors to discuss a regional security framework in the Persian Gulf. What has made the current Russo-Chinese relations durable and resilient since their normalization in 1989 is not only the convergence of some of the fundamental interests but equally the ability of Beijing and Moscow to carefully manage the two countries' differences on various specific issues.

While the BRICS countries' political philosophies differ widely, they adhere to a number of key principles that make their cooperation possible and productive. Top of the list is sovereignty. Russia, China, India, Iran and others not only preach sovereignty, but actually defend and promote it.

Closely linked to sovereignty is equality. Russia's Western adversaries have long tried to humiliate Moscow by portraying it as Beijing's vassal – as if Europe's kowtowing to America and Trump is mere politeness. In reality, however, Sino-Russian political relations are conducted on an equal footing. The same applies to Russia's relations with all other fellow BRICS partners, from Brazil to Indonesia to Egypt.

Sovereign equality suggests non-interference in other nations' domestic politics. This comes easier to countries that do not position themselves as models and sole guardians of universal values. Accepting others as they are, and respecting other peoples' right to have their own institutions is a key prerequisite for inter-civilizational relationships.

There is no need to make BRICS appear what it is not. It is not a bloc, an alliance, or an anti-Western coalition. If anything, its own record offers an insight into a different kind of a world order. This is by no means a paradise, of course, but it is one where diversity thrives, sovereignty is sacred, differences can be managed, and consensus, rather than diktat, reigns. Decision-making there is admittedly hard, and conflicts, including violent ones, are not at all excluded, but it is a much fairer deal than an order where one nation or one group can impose itself on others; lay down the rules for all (except the rule-maker himself); and judge and punish the offenders.

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