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Rethinking Brazil's Role in BRICS

By

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Abstract

BRICS is a geographically diverse group of emerging economies desire to better the global governance system and gain an international voice. The combination of countries, with diverging national goals, has rather been considered odd. Nevertheless, it has survived the past decade with a fair amount of ups and downs. This paper encapsulates the presence particularly of Brazil in the BRICS organization. Brazil's relationship with all the other members of the group has been assessed. It highlights how its character weakened over time with the successive change in leaders. With respect to other members, how much has Brazil fared in the race? It interrogates the placing of a country with such a mediocre growth in the bloc and whether the organization holds a future for Brazil or not.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, South-South Cooperation, Bolansaro, Economic agenda, Multilateralism.

“Brazil is a country of the future....and will always be”

Charles de Gaulle

Introduction

In 2008, the world experienced a severe financial crisis which hampered the stability of international financial institutions. Amidst the crisis while the advanced economies were struggling to keep their economies going, emerging countries Brazil, Russia, India and China joined hands to reform the global financial system. The term ‘BRIC’ was coined by Jim O’ Neill in 2001 highlighting the combined potential of these four countries in the world economy. With more than 42 percent of the world population, 23 percent of GDP, and 18 percent of the world trade (Gaiotto 2019), BRICs offer its members a window of opportunity to accentuate their positions on the world map.

During their first official meeting in Russia in 2009, BRIC nations (South Africa joined in 2011) pledged for an inclusive development and to have a more equitable world order in which the voices of the less developed world are heard. They emphasized on the need to provide credible alternatives to the current financial system dominated by the Atlantic. Despite their internal differences, the group has been focused to get international recognition.

Being a country of geostrategic importance, Brazil has been able to emerge as a core actor in regional developments in Latin America. However, its agenda to achieve a more international presence drove its attention to BRICS. Inclusion in BRICS is an important achievement for this Latin American country. BRICS gave Brazil a stage to stand alongside more popular players like India and China. This classified move of the Brazilian Government highlights the forward thinking nature of its foreign policy. The then president Lula da Silva viewed these countries as key allies in achieving a revision of the west dominated global order. His foreign policies gave special importance to the group.

However, owing to its economic woes and political distress, its visibility is glaringly getting faint and thus, Brazil’s role in the group has been questioned ever since its formation. Does Brazil belong to the group of large emerging economies of the world? And, more importantly, can it afford to lose the group?

Brazil's Foreign Policy Towards BRICS

After the end of the Cold War, Brazil became focused to enhance its foreign ties and increase its international presence. However, it was only in 2003, when Lula da Silva took office, Brazil's foreign policy became more operational. It reflected Brazil's aspirations to have a strong regional and international standing.

With waning American leadership, Brazil's ambition towards making a more multipolar global order started taking shape when it actively participated in the formation of BRICS. Lula's vision of "**South-South solidarity**" was evident by his move to join such a politically diverse inter-governmental organization. It allowed him to promote a more equitable distribution of power and shrink the gap between the global North and South (Zilla 2017, p. 19). The decisive element of such a grouping was the shared vision of Brazil, India, China, and Russia (and later on, South Africa) of delimiting the western hegemony in the global sphere (Zilla 2017, p. 22).

Celso Amorim's¹ "**Active and Generous Foreign Policy**" (Paiva, Mendes & Vieira 2020, p. 133) used soft diplomacy as a tool to enhance Brazil's voice in international matters whilst subtly challenging the domination of the global North. Lula denounced US hegemony and stressed on the need to reinforce cooperation among the emerging countries. He also demanded reform to make the UN Security Council more transparent in its actions and be attentive to the concerns of developing countries to promote peace (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 411).

President da Silva Government's renewed foreign policy was not only aimed at attaining a strong say in global governance but it was a strategic move to enhance Brazil's economic status by cooperating with other emerging economies, especially during such a time when all the advanced economies in the West were projecting slow growth. The policy outlined the broader sustainable economic development goals of Brazil and use BRICS as a catalyst to strengthen trade relations with these emerging economies.

However, Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff lacked the diplomatic maneuver showcased by him. During her first term (2011 - 14), Rousseff's Government was more directed towards solving domestic economic problems. She resorted to more

¹ Minister of Foreign Affairs (2003 - 2010).

interventionist economic policies. Though the underlying objective of the external policy, during her period in office, was similar to that of Lula's, it was not as active as it was before. Her commitment to the organization was inadequate. Rousseff showed relatively little interest in the previous "South-South Cooperation" vision of Lula. She viewed it more as a market for Brazil's production and undermined its geopolitical importance which resulted in a partial contraction in Brazil's engagement with Africa (Marcondes & Mawdsley 2017, p. 687-688).

The country experienced a wave of political scandals which aggravated the economic decline. Rousseff's term was cut short due to the corruption charges which subsequently led to her impeachment. Later on, Lula was also convicted for money laundering. The turbulent political fabric of the country had serious implications for BRICS.

Brazil's presence in BRICS started fading when Michel Temer assumed the presidency in August 2016 due to his lack of interest in seriously engaging with the bloc. The South-South relations are further strained. During the 8th BRICS Summit held in India, his Foreign Minister, Jose Serra, de-prioritized the reform of the UN Security Council from Brazil's Foreign Policy, which contradicted the **Goa Declaration**² (Vieira & Menezes 2016). Serra emphasized that Brazil would focus on enhancing bilateral relations as opposed to his predecessors' pro-multilateralism policy (Vieira & Menezes 2016).

Temer's US leaning views did not align well with the rest of the bloc. This flipped policy particularly concerned China and Russia and thus puts Brazil in a difficult position in the bloc. Russian President Vladimir Putin showed his discontent and unwillingness to engage with Temer's administration, during the Summit (Vieira & Menezes 2016). Hence, his short term in office brought in a complete reversal in Brazil's foreign policy and posed questions about its status in the organization.

Ever since Rousseff's term, Brazil's foreign policy has been on a downward spiral. Situation only exacerbated ahead. With the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2019, Brazil's foreign policy took a turn towards the far-right ideology. The "**New Foreign Policy**" reflects a nationalist ideology and reformulated the traditional plural and multilateral agenda. Ernesto Araujo, the current Head of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

² Official Statement of the 8th BRICS Summit (2016).

(often called Itamaraty), expressed the desire to align with the United States and stressed the country's western roots (Paiva, Mendes & Vieira 2020, p. 143).

Bolansaro's rapprochement with Trump, with whom he shares contempt of the left-wing ideology, is a cause of concern for its economic relationship with China (Agence France-Presse (AFP) 2019). Araujo adopted a rather pragmatic approach to safeguard Brazil's economic interests especially with crucial partners like China (Paiva, Mendes & Vieira 2020, p. 145). During the 11th BRICS Summit, hosted by Bolansaro, he prioritized building a more comprehensive economic cooperation mechanism and strengthening intra-BRICS relations (Paiva, Mendes & Vieira 2020, p. 146).

However, Bolansaro's incompetent diplomatic character and his diminishing political clout pose a risk for Brazil in the grouping. The shared values with other BRICS countries have somewhat withered away. Brazil's, once active, external policies have started losing impetus. Ambition is glaringly absent in the current policy and it speaks volumes about its eventual failure.

Economic performance

The economic agenda of the BRICS organization is to reform the international economic system and consolidate the voice of developing economies. Foundation of the organization lays on strategic mutual economic development. As a group, BRIC members showed an impressive performance in its founding years. The group accounted for 37 percent (USD 16.039 trillion) of the gross world product (Economic Times 2016).

In 2009, after the global financial crisis, Lula saw BRICS as a medium to augment Brazil's trade muscle. He pushed the bloc to develop concrete plans to foster inclusive development in trade and finance infrastructure. His policies were focused on the internationalization of Brazil's booming business sectors. Brazil, being a semi-peripheral state, is always looking for financial support to enhance its economic growth. BRICS gave Brazil an opportunity to consolidate its economic position in the global sphere by offering it access to foreign markets and capital (Abdenur 2013, p. 295).

Under Lula, Brazil showed a commendable growth of 7.5 percent in 2010 resulting from his anti-cyclical policies (Gama 2018). His period is often referred to as "Golden Years." Brazil, like other Latin American countries, benefited from the **commodity boom**

from China. China emerged as Brazil's key trading partner wherein major imports from China were manufactured goods and exports included primary products. However, the opposite was not true as Brazil accounted for a small percent in China's total trade (Zilla 2017, p. 27).

In 2013, the members' share in the group GDP was as follows:

China: 58.75%; Brazil: 14.37%; Russia: 13.41%; India: 11.04%; South Africa: 2.44% (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 407). Thus, Brazil's contribution to BRICS' GDP was similar to Russia and India whereas China dominated the group. **Intra-BRICS trade** increased 14 times from USD 21.1 billion in 2001 to USD 296.4 billion in 2013 which was just 0.8 percent of the total world trade in 2013 (Jianzhang 2017, pp. 18-19). Furthermore, the group's trade was mainly by China, being the dominant partner of other BRICS countries. Brazil's trade engagements with India and Russia are more competitive while with South Africa, it has shown greater trade substitutability (Jianzhang 2017, p. 19).

Brazilian **economic dynamism** came to an end during Rouseff's presidency (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 417). Brazil's economic growth was close to zero due to a drastic fall in commodity prices and huge Government deficits (Wigglesworth 2017). In 2014, the trade balance plummeted to negative USD 4 billion (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 415). Her interventionist policies failed as there was a negative GDP growth of 3.5 percent in 2015, the highest fall among the BRICS nations in that year (Economic Times 2016).

The bloc's unified aversion towards the Bretton Woods System, which is invariably controlled by powerful countries, formed the basis of the formation of the **New Development Bank (NBD)** and **Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA)**. These two were the landmark of the group towards bringing institutional reforms in the global economic fabric. BRICS members attempted to boost the reliance on local currencies and hence, provide an alternative to the developing world (Saran 2017). The funds in NBD were meant for investment projects of the members and safeguard their currencies from speculation. Brazil's share was USD 18 billion in the initial fund of USD 100 billion, the same as India and Russia (Freddy et. al 2019, p. 18). China was the highest contributor with USD 41 billion whereas South Africa's share was merely USD 5 billion (Freddy et. al 2019, p. 18). According to the Ufa Declaration 2015, CRA was meant to provide global financial safety (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 406).

According to the World Bank Indicators (2019), in 2017, the major growth of the BRICS countries was led by the service sector. Brazil showed the highest share of services in its GDP, which was 63.1 percent. In 2018, the BRICS group's total output was 23.3 percent of the world's GDP (Sengupta 2019).

BRICS countries have made sufficient progress in elevating economic cooperation but have been inadequate in coordinating at a broader institutional level. There is a need for the group to develop a more practical mechanism to implement joint economic policies. It can establish a BRICS Free Trade Area to facilitate cost-effective and liberalized trade (Jianzhang 2017, p. 22). It should further promote investment in building information technology and innovation to benefit the members. Overall, these countries, collectively, need to engage in making structural reforms and make efficient agreements.

Intra-BRICS Relations

BRICS is one diverse group, whether in terms of geography, ideologies, or even in terms of the political system. BRICS formation was said to be based on these nations' relatively same economic status. These nations consider this as a platform for economic cooperation and have consistently avoided sensitive political issues. However, the playing field is not leveled here. There is a great deal of disparity when it comes to their economic and political weight and the gains of each of these nations from the organization. India and China have benefited the most from the group whereas Brazil has been in grip of its internal matters. Their differences are much deep-rooted.

For starters, Brazil is the only western country in the bloc. Its western roots and geographical proximity to the US and Western Europe is an apt reason for Brazil to engage more actively with them. Moreover, the kind of political system in these countries differs. Brazil shares democratic values with India and South Africa. Conversely, on the economic front, China is a more active trading partner for Brazil.

Brazil, South Africa, and India have been more democratically engaged owing to their similar values of pluralism and inclusive multilateralism. Brazil's dynamic involvement with Africa has been part of Lula's economic agenda but this has received a slight setback in recent years. Both India and Brazil have been cooperative towards seeking responsible and inclusive solutions for economic development. During the India – Brazil – South Africa (IBSA) meeting in 2003, the three countries came together wherein they

issued the “Brasilia Declaration” (Zilla 2017, p. 23). The document outlined the importance of balanced economic development and multipolarity which formed the cornerstones of the BRICS initiative (Vieira & Ouriques 2016, p. 406).

However, IBSA’s various focused diplomatic ventures have created many differences of opinions and potential conflicts which is evident from the Syrian crisis (2011), wherein IBSA members encouraged dialogue between the parties whereas the remaining BRICS members contradicted (Sotero 2013, pp. 283-284). There is visible friction among the bloc on various issues like Brazil and India’s consistent arguments to reform the United Nations Security Council have not been firmly backed by China and Russia, they being permanent members of the organization already. The group had divergent views during the Doha Round at the World Trade Organization, when India and China also, to some extent, refused to expose their farmers to the efficient agriculture sectors of Brazil and other western powers (Sotero 2013, p. 285).

Moreover, Bolansaro’s position on Venezuelan political crisis differs from that of Russia and China. His support to Juan Guaidao as the interim President violates Brazil’s foreign policy. This is the first point of disagreement with the group under Bolsonaro (Freddy et. al 2019, p. 17). 2019 Amazon wildfires made headlines world over. Bolansaro's lagged response to environmental issues and casual attitude towards protecting the rainforest is highly problematic. BRICS' response to such climate change issues has led the members to develop environment combating strategies but their implementation has rather been flawed. None of the BRICS leaders openly criticized Bolansaro’s inadequate response. Brazil is capable of becoming an environmental power but the global skepticism it has received recently makes it much harder to materialize. In addition to this, Bolansaro's inclination towards Trump and the parallel rise of the US and China postulate a risk for Brazil as it is left hanging between the two rivals.

BRICS nations have been part of the G-20 Group and have been collectively able to slightly influence the agenda of the group. BRICS’ continued stance on reforming the financial institutions like IMF, has contributed greatly towards uniting them during G-20 meets (Stuenkel 2012, p. 11). Nevertheless, they have clashing views on various issues. For Brazil, it has been much active in regional affairs but both BRICS and G-20 are crucial as they give it a fair chance to act influentially in the global arena.

The way forward

Brazil's foreign policy has altered largely over the last two decades. The country's current policy is in the throes of an ineffective decision-making administration of Bolansaro which has left it politically beleaguered. Brazil's internal affairs may be the core reason for its declining international presence. A series of corrupt and incapable leaders since Lula is the main reason for its deterioration in the group. They have altered Da Silva's foreign policy legacy. Bolansaro is an epitome of sheer ignorance and ineptitude. The lack of confidence of Brazilians in the new leader is largely noticeable. Moreover, the economic woes of the country have left a large chunk of its population unemployed and thus, heightening the poverty levels. It would not be absurd to say that Brazil is on its way to becoming a "banana republic" as it stifles with its volatile internal politics and low economic growth.

As Brazil is slowly moving towards Americanism, its relevance in BRICS is slowly becoming dim. Unlike its counterparts India and China, Brazil is still far from becoming an influential global actor. With its industrial and economic base, Brazil at best is likely to remain a regional power.

Brazil's expectations also from BRICS are not entirely met. The country is still in economic trouble. With three nuclear powers and two permanent UN Security Council members, the group has varied perspectives on different political and security issues (Sotero 2013, p. 285). Brazil is essentially a soft power and thus, its placing in the group sounds dubious. Nevertheless, BRICS has provided Brazil more visibility on the global stage. If it was not a part of the group, Brazil would have been in a position of extraordinary exclusion (Sotero 2013, p. 286). Brazil is in a better position to have a say in international matters thanks to the institutional weight and alliances created by the BRICS group (Castro 2013, p.12). Thus, BRICS is Brazil's access pass to interact with global actors.

Now, Brazil has a choice to either continue to limp along or gallop ahead with a new framework. Brazilian policymakers should consider the importance of the group for the country and hence, dealing with it casually would be a disastrous move. There is a need for them to revamp the nation's foreign policy in light of the fast-changing external environment. They need to carefully assess the role of the group in diversifying its trade

and investment priorities. Considering the current leadership, foreign policy creators should be more verbal about the need to solidify Brazil's relations with influential emerging actors and how it can help in achieving economic objectives. They need to convince global leaders of the relevance of the Brazil-BRICS relationship.

It is not the case that just Brazil is losing its significance in the organization but the group as a whole is not taking it seriously. Even after a decade of formation, these countries, individually, have not shown the tenacity leading BRICS, which they have showcased individually at other multilateral forums. There have been instances of overlapping political strategies. There has been much skepticism about their survival. Their agenda is also rather limited.

With the current COVID-19 crisis, BRICS countries' response has been diverse. All nations are occupied with their domestic matters. They have indeed pledged funds to fight the pandemic but the implementation has not been serious enough. They are experiencing more macro-management issues and political risks. Moreover, escalations in the US - China trade war bring grave implications for the group. Also, as the territorial wounds of India and China are exposed, only time will tell what it has in store for the group.

With highly divergent trajectories of the BRICS nations, the question is whether as a group they have a sound future together? We certainly cannot ignore the group's desire to reform the international financial system and have more say in global matters. All these countries are together for a reason which is that they cannot achieve what they seek individually (Sotero 2013, p. 289). BRICS has the potential to project better coordination and cooperation to develop a well-built dynamic organization. If the group continues to run in the coming years, there is a need for structural reform and a need for each member to assess the potential of their role in the group.

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