BRICS and Geopolitics: A Match Made in Heaven?*

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We are living in a multi-polar world under the greater influence of one power. After the shutdown of the government in the US, it can be said that the sole power is about to be challenged. This paper hopes to establish the fact that the future of the international system will continue to be multi-polar. Economic groupings like the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), Mexico, Indonesia, Singapore and Turkey (MIST) and others denote to this. These groupings may present an alternative to geographically locked but indispensable European Union. Despite the system being multi-polar, the United States dominates the international system. This paper deals with the BRICS countries that propose a bid for power in international relations. Will they have equidistant power form one another or will there be a hierarchy in between them? Can they take/make economic or political decisions? Is a geographically spread power structure more effective in controlling the balances between war and peace? Can they remain objective on trouble spots that may arise in Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, Asia and the Americas? This paper hopes to achieve the goal of providing a framework for understanding a multi-polar approach to international relations based on the collaboration of BRICS countries. The first part will be the theoretical framework of the paper. The second part will be concerned with American supremacy in foreign relations and the need to question it. The third part will deal with emerging powers but since the most influential "power politics" are steered by China and Russia the main emphasis will be on them. The last part will come to the conclusion.

Keywords: BRICS, Bi-polar, multi-polar, American policy, international system

Theoretical Framework

This paper will be mostly explanatory research where the author proposes the question whether Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) will be strong enough to challenge the United States or not. The paper will be qualitative in the sense that literature concerning BRICS and United States encounter will be analyzed. The paper hopes to contribute to the field by presenting a framework for analysis in understanding and comparing the BRICS regime to the United States. Is the BRICS an alternative to the European Union (EU) or the US? Does it have to have this approach, can they coexist? If there are more inclusions to the group, will it have the connotation that they are all against the US? Can they all afford to be politically against the US?

The theoretical framework of the paper will be based upon the theories of bi-polarity and multi polarity. Bi-polar and multi-polar theories are compared to see which promises is a more stable international system. Since the bipolar system is more threatening and influenced by zero sum gaming (one's lose being others' gain), the multi-polar system is more promising for peace.

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Theories of Bi-polarity and Multi Polarity¹

There are many views on how polarity contributes to peace or facilitates conflict. Polarity refers to how distribution of power is managed in an international system. Bi-polarity refers to distribution of power in which two major powers have the advantage of economic, political and cultural influence over others. The colonial era, the rivalry between France and Great Britain and the Cold War are all examples of a bi-polar world.

Moreover, Multi-polarity, contends to a distribution of power in which more than two states have equal amount of economic, political and cultural influence. The period starting from the Westphalia Treaty to the onset of World War I and the current international system can be defined as being multi-polar.

Morton Kaplan (1962) produced a model that explains how international system is formed. He introduced his international system model in accordance with the organizing principle and the number of states taking part in this system (p. 5). His six systems will not be dwelled upon, rather the balance of power and loose bi-polar systems will be introduced since it is interconnected with alliance formation and international stability attempts. His balance of power model appears to have resembled to the multi-polar system. The balance of power system must have at least five states that have similar or equal power within the international system. No one state should have the capacity or the will to destruct or dominate the system (Ari, 2004, p. 518). Since there is a fragile balancing system, no state will be dominant and others will regulate one another in such aspirations. Balance of power system differs from building alliances. According to Kaplan (1962), alliances are built upon temporary interests or objectives (p. 520).

Once the objective is attained the alliance disintegrates. The balance of power system is also more permissive towards different ideologies. The primal assumption is that interest and ideologies can change but the international system that is based upon balance of power endures changes and adaptations. Kaplan (1962) also noted that having a five state system is essential. If the number of states decreases to three, two states can easily come together and outnumber the remaining one state. He also notes that there can be an equilibrating state that checks the system's maintenance. That state rarely becomes part of the balance of power. Great Britain between the 18th and 20th century can be presented as the equilibrating state (Kaplan, 1962, p. 522).

The loose bi-polar system is a system that concentrates itself on two influential powers. Two blocs are usually formed and the remaining states within the system organize around the two states. There is no equilibrating state; instead, there is a mediator, in which case, either the non-aligned or international organizations pursue the role. Since bi-polar system does not permit one bloc to dominate the other from a military perspective, second-strike capability becomes important (Ari, 2004, p. 522). Inside the bloc there is a hierarchy, if there wasn't one the system would be no different from a balance of power system. The bloc that is organized by hierarchy will have the convenience of controlling its members. Relations will be tight with fewer options. The bloc that is not organized by hierarchy will have the difficulty of keeping its members in order. Since relations within the bloc are loose, members have the option to exit from the bloc and may join the non-aligned group. If both groups are organized around hierarchy, no conflict will arise. Blocs will be clear-cut and no transformations will take place. If there is a hybrid organizational system, the two blocs may not have the ability to stay as a bloc or maintain the stability in balancing the other bloc. Alliances are formed not on

¹ This section is a revised version of the part of a section that was previously prepared by the author and published in *Balkan Social Science Review*, vol. 4, 2014, pp. 253-273.

temporary short-term interests; there are long-range goals. Ideology is one of catalyzers of the formation of blocs.

Deutsch and Singer (1964) record that as the system moves from bi-polarity to multi-polarity, the chances of war diminish (p. 360). They record that once blocs are formed the freedom to form alternative alliances, the interaction between and across blocs are limited therefore the fertile environment towards a conflict is created. It is contradictory whether or not every interaction outside the bloc will result in cooperation; it may as well be competitive. Deutsch and Singer (1990) assumed that “one of the greatest threats to stability of any impersonal social system is the shortage of alternative partners” (p. 158). Both of the authors have a pluralist model for the international system. As long as the international system stays plural rather than being divided into blocs stability of the system can be achieved.

Kenneth Waltz (1967), moreover, put forward the idea that a bi-polar system is more stabilizing than a multi-polar one (p. 220). His rationale is firmly engulfed in the idea that the unavoidable disparity between the superpowers and the other states forbids them from becoming uncontrollable. The superpowers monitor and control the system as they control the use of force and the spillover effects on such usage. According to Waltz (1967), since both of the superpowers will seek self-preservation, they will strive to keep the status quo. The status quo will be achieved by maintaining balance of power in military, political and technological capabilities. Waltz (1967) also record that since the superpowers are “supreme in their power that they use less of it” (p. 223). The two superpowers will control and monitor their blocs and each other and this alone will guarantee the stability in the international system. No superpower will be able to act alone or selfishly knowing that it will encounter its adversary.

Richard N. Rosecrance is critical of both Deutsch-Singer and Waltz. He proposed a different international system, a system that is neither bipolar nor multi-polar but bi-multipolar (Rosecrance, 1966, p. 318). His criticism of a bipolar international system concentrates on, a bipolar system contending to a zero sum system. Conflict is unavoidable; one’s gain is other superpower’s loss. Rosecrance also noted that a multi-polar system may appear to be more stable but since there is a greater variety of interest and options, the states will not have homogenous policies. He also adds that a bipolar system’s worst-case scenario can be calculated as total destruction whereas instability in a multi-polar system cannot be calculated as distinctly (Dougherthy & Pfaltzgraff, 1960, p. 161). Rosecrance’s new model of bi-multipolarity brings together better qualities of both systems. In this system, two major powers would be regulator for conflicts in the international system. If the two major powers have a conflict, than the multi-polar states will interfere to solve it. The bipolar states will restrain themselves from having conflicts, the multi-polar states will also restrain from having conflicts. If they have conflicts, they will know that the bipolar states will react. He also insists that increase of multi-polarity will enhance detente between the superpowers and that will insure the stability in the international system (Dougherthy & Pfaltzgraff, 1960).

The American Supremacy?

It can be said that the period after the Second World War was the American century. Its resilience during the cold war and uni-polar dominance after the cold war placed itself on a pedestal. The road was not always so easy. The rest of the world watched in awe, even Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, preferred

to keep US at bay. Then something unexpected happened. The Al Qaeda attacked the American soil and the US started “a war against terrorism”. The international institutions could not even define terrorism, how could it be fought as if it was conventional warfare? Since the US had become the hegemon² it dominated the international system. According to Mearsheimer (2004), hegemony meant domination of the system, this hegemony might be regional, such as the case for US, regional hegemon of the Western hemisphere (p. 185). He also added that unless a hegemon gains a nuclear superiority over others, it will remain a regional hegemon. Since there are many nuclear powers, US doesn’t dominate the nuclear threshold, therefore to this logic it is not a global hegemon. Whether or not being a hegemon solely depends on nuclear capacity is doubtful. There may be other factors affecting the standing. The US can be the most powerful nation in the world but it does not dominate the world, nor does it have an intention of doing so.

The period following the September 11 attacks started a new era. The economic instabilities occurred in the United States following the attacks but a downfall of the nation did not occur. In the international arena, the justification for invading Iraq became puzzling. Nonetheless, the great power in the unipolar world could not be stopped. The same year Goldman and Sachs launched the idea of BRICS, in this analysis, O’neill (2014) noted that the Western dominance of economic activities would replace by the economies of BRICS. The economic gravity was shifting itself from the West in to other geographies or as Fareed Zakaria (2008) terms it as the “rest”. To Zakaria’s inclination, the “rest” against the West was unavoidable. James Hoge (2004) also noted that there was a disturbing “power shift”. John Ikenberry agreed with both Zakaria and Hoge and asked an important question, “a change in the international system is apparent but what kind of a new global order would replace the current one” (pp. 2-7).

Michael Cox (2006) added another question to the list; does the US economy have any signs of declining? He noted that, in terms of living standards, GDP and other economic factors, the US economy continues to lead the world economy. The US economy continues to be leader in research in science and technology. Innovation is also another strength (Bloomberg, 2014). According to a recent research that was done by the Bloomberg group, China was 25th and Russia was 18th in the most innovative country research. The US was 3rd. Global Competitiveness Index (2013)³ also portrays the fact that the West remains to be leading the “rest”. Out of the total of 143 economies, the US economy ranks 5th, Brazil 56th, Russia 64th, China 29th, India 60th and South Africa ranks 50th. The US prominence continues in innovation and military and yet China’s economic power hasn’t transferred itself to political influence (Cox, 2006, p. 376). Another problem with China is that due to its political instabilities and authoritarian regime, other powers in the region support the US instead of China.

The two down sides of the US policy may have been Iraq war, which has been ended by the Obama administration and the economic crisis. The economic crises may have cripples the US political influence but none so far has challenged its supremacy. The west appears to be still attractive (Global Competitiveness Index, 2013, p. 377). Soft power is another element that the US is dominant. It is view of accommodating a pluralist culture and inflicting an open system of higher education attracts more students and scientists to its shores.⁴ In

² Mearsheimer (2004) defined a hegemon as “a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system”.

³ Global Competitiveness Index. Retrieved from http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2013-14/GCR_Rankings_2013-14.pdf

⁴ Out of the top 50 universities most are located in the US. Only two from China make the top 50 list. QS World University Ranking. Retrieved from <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2013#sorting=rank+region=+country=+faculty=+stars=false+search>

hardware and software technologies the US is still dominant (Majumdar, 2009).

When the Asian peninsula is reviewed it can be seen that China and Japan are in great competition. Japan resents China's rise and India has problems with all Asian neighbors and particularly with China. The entity that is called Asia does not exist as a collective entity such as Europe (Cox, 2006, p. 379). Most of the countries in Asia all have post colonial identities. They are suspicious of one another and this weakens any sense of common purpose. The group that is termed as the transatlantic community is more settled and amicable. Although China a big economy, the other counties does not believe that it can lead the world. It has no such mission or vision. The US on the other hand does everything to get rid of any new opponents and has a great deal of power. China continues to have problems at home. The transatlantic relationship is still important because EU and US account for half of world GDP in terms of value and purchasing power. Secondly, most important banks are still in Europe and US and the two together are world's important source of foreign direct investment (Cox, 2006, p. 380). We don't live in a world where enemies and friends are well defined instead in a world that partnership has become a necessity.

Fareed Zakaria (2008) envisioned a "post-American world" and points out that there are two approaches to that world. The first one is a world that has no other power dominating the international system. The second approach consists of emergence of specific powers or regions. The global financial crisis forced the US presidents to redefine the G8. Rather than having an elitist and discriminating group they have decided to enlarge the group. After the global economic crisis, the G8 was broadened into the G20 (Alexandroff & Kirton, 2010). The G20 became the major global financial institution (Hart & Jones, 2011).

US foreign policy most depends upon two major principles (Vezirgiannidou, 2013). The first principle is exceptionalism (McCartney, 2004; Ruggie, 2005), which is based upon the understanding that the US is alone and unique in the world. This principle insists on "splendid isolationism" which portrays the action plan of the US not interfering in issues that are irrelevant to American security. The second principle is exemptionalism, which places the US above and over other nations. If these two principles are the major motivations for making US policy, then it faces a difficult dilemma. How can the US preserve its unique position and yet obtain cooperation from the rising powers?

The Emerging Powers

What is an emerging power? There is no single definition that all experts rely upon. There may be commonality between the cases. It has to have a growing economy. Andrew Hurrell added four other factors that the "emerging" powers have in common (Hurrell, 2006, p. 1).

There is also number of characteristics shared by emerging powers (Macfarlane, 2006). Firstly, there is a regional preponderance; Secondly, there is an aspiration to a global role; Thirdly, there is a contesting of US hegemony; and Finally, they are all unhappy with the existing structure of international politics. Emerging power is determined by their place in the international system.

The main goal of the BRICS is to counterbalance US hegemony. BRICS can also be seen as the guardian of the interests of the developing countries (Jayan, 2012, p. 371). It can't act as a single entity because it is restricted by political, ideological and economic differences among its members.

There are also some common points within the BRICS. First, they have to have a growing economy, a potential for military and political power and internal cohesion. The second common denominator is each

emerging power aspires more influential role in global affairs, particularly China, India and Brazil. China is identified as a sovereignty leader. It questions the legitimacy of every kind of intervention even ones that are humanitarian, on the basis of questioning the sovereignty of the state. Its authoritarian capitalism model is a direct challenge to the liberal capitalist model of the US. India on the other hand is aligned with the US particularly on nuclear issues and pursues a good bi-lateral ties with the US and is also critical of humanitarian intervention. Brazil, takes part in trade and energy realm. South Africa uses its weight in international institutions. Russia is still dependent on gas exports and its major weakness lies in its declining population (Macfarlane, 2006). The reemergence of jihadist terrorism in Russia has weakened its political position.

The third commonality is relations among them have developed and deepened and the finally, the rising powers were never integrated into the post 1945 order.

There is also number of characteristics shared by emerging powers (Macfarlane, 2006). There is a regional preponderance. Secondly, there is an aspiration to a global role. Thirdly, there is a contesting of US hegemony. Finally, they are all unhappy with the existing structure of international politics. Emerging power is determined by their place in the international system. Russia can't be an emerging power because its vital interests are built upon being a hegemonic power (Macfarlane, 2006, p. 42). After the end of the cold war Russia sought cooperation with the US but also balanced it with multi-polarity. It continued its relations with China and India. In the first six years of Putin presidency, Russia continued its balancing mechanisms very effectively (Trenin, 2002). It can be inferred that US uni-polarity is a threat to Russian security. NATO's eastward enlargement⁵ is also a threat. Russia also emphasizing its role in the Security Council bolsters the role of UN as a legally based multilateral structure and the importance of Security Council.

In foreign policy, firstly, the emerging states phenomena can be termed as these states have deep, bilateral, economic and political relations, these states have with fragile and rogue states (Hart & Jones, 2010, p. 75). Secondly, rise of the emerging powers is dependent on disunity of the western bloc. There is no combined and strong bloc. Thirdly, within multilateral institutions the emerging states can exert influence that is disproportionate to its size. For example at the UN emerging powers wield influence over decisions through their roles in effecting regional blocs. Bloc voting increases the voices of the emerging powers (Hart & Jones, 2010, p. 76).

US dominance will fade due to "the reliance on the dollar" and America's decreasing dominance in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). US dominance in the common zones such as air, sea and space continue but it may be challenged⁶. Transnational threats make emerging powers more sensitive towards one another rather than challenging US superiority. Since Asian neighbors do not trust one another to see that US Naval role is transferred to them (Hart & Jones, 2010, p. 81). US has acted as a stabilizer of the balance of power in regions of strategic importance. How China and India will grow economically and how they will use that power is questionable. States that are geographically proximate to a major power usually prefer to bandwagon. China has identified its energy needs therefore it has been present in Saudi Arabia and Iran. India also deepened its relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

There is a regional bi-polarity in Asia-Pacific region. Neither China nor US can dominate one another because of this bi-polarity. This also guarantees that China and US will not wage war against each other (Peou,

⁵ "The National Security concept of the Russian Federation", 28 June, 2000, p. 2

⁶ China wants to build a stronger navy, aircraft carrier and air missiles and underwater mines. India has the world's third largest navy and it wants to secure trade lines.

2014). The dominant power will defend the status quo; rising power has no chance of challenging the dominant power. Global uni-polarity and regional bi-polarity may cause a power transition war but China will not challenge the US. If China is challenged by problems domestically, it may turn belligerent towards its neighbors or international economic instability or interruption in China's growth trajectory. US may have created the new world order after World War II but it was also constrained by it. Japan is against the rise of China, therefore it tries to balance this rise with keeping close ties with the US. China is not in good relationship with its neighbors. China could not dominate Vietnam because it had close ties with the US. It could not dominate Thailand because it had a security alliance with the US. Myanmar was dominated by China. Furthermore, US and Cambodia are still trading partners. What stops China from challenging the US? Perception of China still poses a threat to other states and their national security. Geography is a key variable that is more powerful than ideological solidarity. Chinese authoritarianism also is another threat. US strategic interest in the region hasn't changed. It still maintains a security order based on alliances. This is designed to prevent any power regional or external from gaining hegemony in the region.

Like China, Russia doesn't support humanitarian intervention too because of the concerns for sovereignty. It can be said that Russia is not an emerging power, its foreign policy is dominated by reversing the effects of the 1980s and 1990s and a return to great power status (Macfarlane, 2006, p. 56).

India, on the other hand pursues a double prong policy. It continues to be in good relations with the BRICS countries and yet open to negotiation efforts by the US⁷ India is hoping to have a cooperation with the US on high-tech goods in which the US will provide technology and start co-production with India. This will not be a dilemma instead it will suit the Indian interest. India hopes to receive best of both worlds.⁸ The recent interest in India by the US, President Obama visiting India in January, is because China is continuing to economically grow, if India continues to be neglected the Asia-Pacific region soon will be out of control⁹. Another reason may be that American firms want to be more effective in the Indian market, therefore closer and more interactive relations are needed.

Brazil and US are not on friendly terms, especially after backing the opponent, Aécio Neves, against President Rousseff during the presidential election (Engdahl, 2014). The major policy change is due to Brazilian insistence on constructing an underwater fiber optic telecommunications cable to Portugal. The trans Atlantic IT routes were under US management, this creates a grift. Brazil is also using its own e-mail system called *Expresso*. It refuses to use outlook or other Microsoft products due to suspected espionage attempts by these countries (Engdahl, 2014). Brazil is also supporting Petrobras (a national oil and gas exploration company) rather than ExxonMobil and Chevron. Petrobras and other companies such as Repsol (Spanish and Brazilian company) signed an agreement with the Chinese Sinopec company.

South Africa was asked to join the group since it had the largest economy in the Sub-Saharan Africa. It had vast sources of natural resources such as gold, diamond, platinum, easy access to finance for business and advanced banking system. The country is also viewed to have an influence on the rest of the continent. Its inclusion would offer BRICS members improved access to a very large consumer base in the African continent

⁷ RT-op-ed "India wants fruitful relations with both BRICS and the US. Retrieved from <http://rt.com/op-edge/226303-india-usa-visit-obama-relations/>

⁸ RT-op-ed "India wants fruitful relations with both BRICS and the US. Retrieved from <http://rt.com/op-edge/226303-india-usa-visit-obama-relations/>

⁹ RT-op-ed "India wants fruitful relations with both BRICS and the US. Retrieved from <http://rt.com/op-edge/226303-india-usa-visit-obama-relations/>

with resources like oil and platinum (Treasury Department of South Africa, 2014). South Africa is also the most developed country in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and serves as a gateway to Africa (Treasury Department of South Africa, 2014). It wishes to widen its cooperation with the US.

The main goal of the BRICS is to counterbalance US hegemony. BRICS can also be seen as the guardian of the interests of the developing countries (Jayan, 2012, p. 371). It can't act as a single entity because it is restricted by political, ideological and economic differences among its members. Their only common denominator may be not following a path that was preconditioned by a great power. They also have the courage to question and resist their influence by forming an economic institution.

Conclusions

Brazil hosted the sixth BRICS summit this month. At the end of the summit it was declared that a new development bank (Watson, 2014). Trade may not be major strength point of the BRICS but they are still dissatisfied with the present global order. They hope to resist Western influence. There are many criticisms of the international order but the attempts of challenging and succeeding are still low. Brazilian economy is still too closed up, China is still a threat and Russia is still too imperial.

There are also critics that claim that the new development bank should not be a clone of the IMF or the World Bank (Walker, 2014). It is also questioned whether it is more effective to revise an old financial system or to set up a new? There were also other attempts in classifying new emerging states such as MINT¹⁰ and MIST but they were not as comprehensive.

There may be many attempts to neutralize the US at least in economic aspects even if it is not in political terms. BRICS tries hard in overcoming the fear of a dominating power. Yet its results are not as promising as it is thought. US still appears to have the upper hand in both economics and political relations.

A multi-polar system inflicts the most fear there is a potential hegemon with military capability and potential power. Bi-polarity does not inflict fear because of balance of power. Great powers balance against capabilities, not intentions. Cooperation among states is challenging because they can't commit themselves to peaceful world order. Second, they can't put away power considerations and work to promote peace. Almost every state wants to maximize its gains (Mearsheimer, 2004, pp. 188-195). The important aspect is we don't live in a world where enemies and friends are well defined instead in a world that partnership has become a necessity.

Every organization, such as BRICS, depends upon transferring economic power into political power. If it is successful, it may actually challenge the great power of the 21st Century. It may not be strong enough reach its goal just now, but that doesn't mean that it will never either.

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¹⁰ MINT stands for Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey.

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