

Emerging Role of BRICS: Shaping Global Security and Peacebuilding

Samir Bhattacharya

Associate Fellow, Observer Research Foundation

samir.b@orfonline.org

On June 10, 2024, during the Foreign Affairs Ministers of the BRICS countries meeting in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, the discussion encompassed a number of crucial issues both at the regional and international levels, including global instabilities.¹ One key matter of discussion was Sudan's ongoing civil war and its consequent instabilities. As the civil war in Sudan crosses 500 days without any end in sight, the humanitarian disaster in the country is getting exacerbated every passing day with more than 10.7 million people internally displaced and half of the population is facing starvation.² The expanded BRICS bloc, which now includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iran, and Russia, all have some vested interests in the Sudan crisis and its aftermath. Therefore, the question is whether BRICS as an institution would be interested in playing the peacebuilder role and whether Sudan could be their first test case.

It's interesting to note that security occupies a significant space on the organisation's agenda, even though its primary focus is economic endeavours. There's no denying that the coalition wants to include international security in its expanding role.³ Indeed, the BRICS narrative has consistently emphasised security and peace. The BRICS have frequently stated their intention to assume more responsibility at the regional and global levels as well as their willingness to support the maintenance and stability of the international order.⁴

Evidently, security-related concerns have started to crop up more frequently in the most recent BRICS publications. For example, the number of references to "security" (32) and "terrorism/terrorist" (36) in the 2016 Goa summit declaration was similar to the number of references to "economic" (36).⁵ Furthermore, several security meetings have been held by the coalition's member state national security advisors. However, there hasn't been a comparable turning point in the coalition's institutionalisation of security, in contrast to the New Development Bank (NDB), which indicates an increasing interest in economic matters among its member nations.

Global Security as BRICS Agenda

Therefore, when the foreign ministers of the BRICS countries met in Russia and unanimously reaffirmed the idea of "African solutions to African problems", it came as a surprise to many. Indeed, African solutions should continue to form the cornerstone of conflict resolution in Africa. Yet, the African Union is clearly unable to resolve the crisis because of its structural issues. Therefore, it is puzzling that the BRICS group declined to act as a conflict mediator, particularly considering that many of its members have significant expertise in international peacebuilding initiatives, including those in Africa.

For instance, China, one of the BRICS countries, has recently become more involved in global peacebuilding initiatives encompassing political mediation, peacekeeping, and conflict management in war-torn nations like Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar.⁶ Another member, Russia, through the Wagner Group, a private military corporation recently renamed as Africa Corps, actively provides security throughout the African continent.⁷ It's interesting to note that since both nations are Security Council permanent members, they have more structural authority to participate in international peacebuilding initiatives.⁸ It is probably time for the BRICS countries to choose to formally assume the role of peacebuilders in the Global South.

Contrary to popular perception, its security agenda has progressed since the grouping was founded, although uneven and painstakingly slow, as evidenced in various BRICS documents. During the first annual

summits, the member states' top priorities were addressing the impacts of the financial crisis, as seen by the coalition's emphasis on economic cooperation among the member states and brainstorming ways to reduce the shock of the global financial crisis (GFC).⁹ With subsequent summits and frequent ministerial and sub-ministerial meetings, the agenda of the BRICS Declarations and their corresponding Plans of Action has expanded to encompass global security.

The BRICS nations also reaffirm their opposition to terrorism in all forms. They support the UN enacting a Convention on International Terrorism, promoting and enhancing counterterrorism efforts by fostering collaboration. The BRICS nations are also debating developing a more potent global information security framework and combating cybercrime.¹⁰

The BRICS Roadmap of Practical Cooperation on Ensuring Security in the Use of ICT is one example of how the BRICS have collectively addressed this issue.¹¹ Examples of how BRICS members have integrated security at the national level include the international counterterrorism conventions hosted by India¹² and Russia's role as a mediator in the Syrian peace process and in the greater MENA region¹³. Other examples include initiatives only some groups have taken, like the treaty draft that China and Russia submitted to the Conference on Disarmament¹⁴. The treaty is meant to prevent the placement of weapons in space. However, as the BRICS nations prepare to take centre stage in world politics, they should consider leading peacebuilding projects.

Position of BRICS on UN-led Security regime

International peace and security are primarily the responsibility of the UN Security Council, one of the six central UN bodies established through the UN Charter.¹⁵ Whereas the label of "Alternative World Order" or "China-led world order" has frequently and often casually been associated with BRICS in Western discourse, BRICS does not want to supplant the UN system or the UNSC as the organisation that provides global security.¹⁶ At best, it aims to enhance the current system and raise the voice of the global south.¹⁷ Besides, the BRICS is not a defence alliance. It does not even seek to possess a unified military force despite the coalition members' ostensibly growing interest in collaborating on international security matters.

Furthermore, in contrast to regional organisations, which rely on spatially defined common interests to build a collaborative agenda, BRICS is spatially independent. BRICS is a loose alliance of emerging nations without any physical logic of contiguousness. For quite some time, there has been a discourse concerning the reform of the United Nations, encompassing its Security Council, concerning augmenting the participation of developing nations in the Council's membership. BRICS wholeheartedly support the idea of UN expansion, making it more representative and reflective of the current world order.¹⁸ In the meantime, as an institution, BRICS also seeks to supplement the traditional UN efforts by effectively addressing current global concerns and advancing the rightful aspirations of the Global South.

Therefore, when the first BRICS Working Group on Peacekeeping was established in Johannesburg under the framework of the 2018 Declaration, it signalled the group's interest in expanding its agenda in the security domain.¹⁹ The BRICS nations support upholding universal values, including equality, non-aggression, territorial integrity, unity, and respect for sovereignty. The organisation also highlights how important it is that the UN Security Council (UNSC) and other UN institutions undergo significant reform. India, Brazil, and South Africa want to be more involved in the UN system now that China and Russia are permanent members.

Further, BRICS countries acknowledge that the UN is crucial in preserving and advancing global security and peace. They reiterate that the UN Charter and widely accepted standards of international law ought to function as the foundation for and guide all peacekeeping and peace-making operations, such as preventive deployments and post-conflict peacebuilding. Truly, over the last one decade, BRICS nations have made

substantial contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts, playing prominent roles in providing financial and military resources to UN peacekeeping operations.²⁰

On the other hand, the BRICS have frequently voiced candid criticism of the values and norms that Western nations advocate for resolving disputes. The group has frequently voiced scepticism towards actions and ideologies that could jeopardise the political independence and territorial integrity of sovereign states, placing a significant focus on the concepts of sovereign equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. The primary illustration of this can be seen in the harsh rebuke of NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, which was held accountable for the disintegration of state institutions, mainly the army and law enforcement agencies, and the subsequent escalation of terrorist activity in the nation.²¹ The Ufa Declaration was strongly worded, although it did not specifically mention NATO or any NATO ally engaged in the Libyan operation.²² This is likely due to the group's common aversion to Western interventionism in crises involving fragile states.

Towards this objective, the BRICS have supported a dispute resolution strategy over the years that emphasises the sensitivities of developing nations still recovering from colonialism. From a South-focused point of view, the group acknowledged the contribution of regional and sub-regional institutions like the African Union, the Arab League, or the Economic Community of West African States, and it has explicitly said that it endorses initiatives that are "nationally-led, nationally-owned" in peace processes.²³

Way forward

The absence of a budget, secretariat, single market, standards-setting body, and institutional structure characterises BRICS. Though a big step toward non-Western investment, the BRICS New Development Bank is significantly smaller than the World Bank or European Investment Bank. In addition, the priorities and profiles of the ten countries vary and frequently conflict with one another. However, the fundamental ideas of peaceful coexistence at the basis of any multilateral organisation like BRICS remain as crucial as ever in a world where realpolitik and big power rivalries increasingly rule international interactions.

In the future, the group will undoubtedly have more influence over this particular area of decision-making thanks to its rising economic and political clout, growing size, expanding financial opportunities, and active foreign policy. In their first fifteen years of existence, the BRICS have shown a growing desire to extend their collaboration from the traditional domains of development and the economy to international security.

Despite the institutionalisation of security issues moving more slowly than development cooperation, the BRICS countries may soon need to take a unified stance on several security-related concerns, such as food security, energy security, and maritime security, including piracy. Therefore, the member countries must identify a few key areas of security cooperation for Russia inside the BRICS framework. This becomes more crucial as the talk of its expansion during the upcoming summit continues.

ENDNOTES

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