

# Norway and the BRICS (I): An Overview of Emerging Power Cooperation

*Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira*

## Summary

In assessing the current status and importance of the BRICS states, the fact that none of them were ever fully members of the post-1945 order may very well be the most important characteristic. The BRICS are all emerging powers, which to some extent influences their general foreign policy outlook. But, as we argue here, the future of the grouping must also be understood in light of Russia's weakened economic and political position today. While Brazil, India and South Africa have traditionally been staunch defenders of non-intervention, their foreign policies of the last decades have been based on being able to combine this position with close ties to Western powers.

It is far from unthinkable that Russia's current position will push those three countries to collaborate more closely within the confines of IBSA, the grouping comprising the BRICS without the less democratic Russia and China. Such collaboration might involve less defiance towards the West, as the grouping is perceived as having a "shared identity" with more "normative power".

We conclude that a policy towards emerging powers cannot be anchored solely around the BRICS, but must take into account other groupings and states as well how changing circumstances can dramatically alter the significance of these groupings.

The BRICS have become an important grouping in international politics. In assessing the importance of the BRICS for Norway and the challenges they represent, we need to delve into who the BRICS are and what they represent.

On one level, assessing who the BRICS are is a given, as the acronym is built on the club membership. Starting on the basis of the RIC cooperation between Russia, India and China, Brazil joined the group for high-level talks from 2006 which culminated in the first BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg in 2009 – finally giving a formal reference point to the Goldman Sachs acronym which had been of common use since 2003. South Africa joined the club in 2010, turning the plural "s" of BRICs into a capital one. Yet, the fact that five of the most important rising or emerging powers are formally part of an association, does not preclude them from cooperation on other fronts. For instance, the RIC cooperation has continued to take place on the sidelines of BRICS, the 13th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China having just wrapped up in Beijing on 2 February 2015.

To be sure, it is not surprising that cooperation among rising powers would take place on a number of different arenas. Indeed, beyond the "emerging power" label and foreign policy ambitions, the countries have few common characteristics. Searching for commonalities between the emerging powers, one is tempted to conclude that above average economic growth is the only factor they all have in common. Russia, seated in the seat of the Soviet Union in the UN Security Council, and China, the potential rising superpower, are regarded by many a commentator as belonging to the category of great powers rather than emerging ones. China's GDP is larger than the size of the four others combined, while in terms of population India and China are about seven times

larger than the three remaining ones. Equally so, China's defense spending equals roughly that of the four others combined. Brazil, India and South Africa on the other hand are well-developed democracies, while Russia and China figure much lower on these indicators. In terms of trade, most BRICS have strong economic ties with China, save for Russian and Indian exports, where the Netherlands and USA figure as their main export partner respectively. Germany, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Australia, UAE, Switzerland, Italy also figure as important trade partners for many of the BRICS.

<i>The BRICS at a glance</i>	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Population	198	141	1,223	1,354	51
GDP 2012 (\$ B)	2,396	2,022	1,824	8,227	384
GDP per Capita 2012 (\$ PPP)	11,875	17,708	3,829	9,162	11,375
Defense Spending (\$ B)	31	87	47	188	4
GDP Growth (Average 2002-12)	3.5	4.7	7.2	10.3	3.5
Main Export Partner	China	Netherlands	USA	USA	China
Main Import Partner	China	China	China	Japan	China

Sources: IMF, MNI Indicators, SIPRI Yearbook, IISS, Michigan State University/Global Edge

Based on such an overview, it is easy to make the case that to look at the BRICS as one group in terms of Norwegian foreign policy towards them makes little sense, as they all have quite different foreign policy engagements, different economic profiles and different systems of governance. The argument could therefore easily be made that the BRICS are little more than a label. Yet, such a conclusion would be a hasty one. The BRICS are all what is commonly referred to as emerging or rising powers, which to some extent influences their general foreign policy outlook. Furthermore, as Andrew Cooper has pointed out, "labels matter" (2010: 63).

After a brief overview of the different BRICS countries, we offer some reflection on different emerging power groupings or "labels" before ending with some remarks on the nature and role of emerging powers today.

## Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

The BRICS share certain similarities. As discussed above, these are less a matter of economic, military or political aspects, but more a question of stated ambitions and their view on the power structure of international society. Being all states who are "on the outside looking in" as Andrew Hurrell (2006) has argued with reference to the fact that none of the BRICS were ever fully integrated in the post-1945 world order. They share a strong anti-hegemonic commitment, and show little willingness to abandon or set aside the principle of territorial state sovereignty.

For instance, Brazil's foreign policy establishment has sought to make the country indispensable in major international negotiations and to gain credibility as a useful mediator between north and south, industrialized and developing

countries. Brazil dismisses ambitions to acquire substantial military capacity, and has become a significant player in issues ranging from trade to development cooperation, from climate change to international peace and security.

Russia's association with the rising power club is more problematic. The country has defied Western forms of influence more strongly than any of the other BRICS, and sees itself as a traditional great power rather than an emerging one. This impacts the range of foreign policy alternatives with Russia, and certainly its position as a defiant outsider – "looking in", perhaps, but wanting to stay on the outside. The recent annexation of Crimea and the ongoing engagement in Ukraine also makes it difficult to assess Russia's long-term goals in terms of its current policies. One could argue that to Russia, association with the BRICS club is more a question of generating momentum for checking Western influence.

India's profile as an emerging power is more clear-cut. With a strong economy, important defense spending and major influence in its region, Indian elites argue that working together with other countries labeled as "emerging" will add further momentum to India's growth, influence and prestige. Treating China as part of a group of rising powers is not straightforward. For, while there is no doubt that China is rising, such a rise is rather as contestant to a great power "+" status. As such, to the extent that China is a rising power, it is so along purely economic lines, and first and foremost, one could argue, by name or by association, as the C in BRICS. However, it is also possible to address China from the perspective of "outside looking in". For, while China's capabilities are undisputed, China has not yet fully taken part in the institutions of international society, as it has remained on the outside. Being the smallest of the rising powers in economic and military terms, South Africa's membership to the BRICS club is less a matter of economic or capability indicators than the leadership role it assumes in Africa.

## The BRICS and Other Groupings

No doubt, the BRICS are important in current affairs, and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. Yet, the BRICS do not tell the whole story when it comes to the role played by emerging powers today. In fact, depending on indicators and issues, any policy towards emerging powers must be mindful of other states than the BRICS as well as other groupings.

Between 2001 and 2005, the BRIC countries were a group largely by virtue of being emerging *markets* rather than emerging powers. This meaning changed when the BRIC countries institutionalized their relations at the first BRIC Summit in Yekaterinburg in 2009. The background to this summit may help understand aspects of the BRIC countries' policies and outlook. The initiative behind the summit was largely a Russian one, as the BRIC countries met at the initiative of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. Tying the group of emerging powers more closely together also fit well in Putin's need for strengthening Russia's position vis-à-vis the West.

As Oliver Stuenkel has argued, given the central role of Russia in establishing the BRIC partnership in the first place, studying Russia's ambitions for the BRICS collaboration may offer cues as to the future of the BRICS partnership (2013). In advance of the fifth BRICS Summit, Russia released its *Concept of participation of the Russian Federation in BRICS*. The document boasts that "the creation of BRICS initiated in 2006 by the Russian Federation has been one of the most significant geopolitical events at the start of the new century. In a short while, the association managed to become an important factor of world politics." It further states that the BRICS "can potentially become a key element of a new system of global governance, first of all, in the financial and economic areas. At the same time, the Russian Federation stands in favor of positioning BRICS in the world system as a new model of global relations, overarching the old dividing lines between East and West, and North and South." Of importance too is Russia's mention of "creating a permanent secretariat" for the BRICS, an issue which could potentially contribute to further institutionalize the grouping.

Yet, in spite of the traction the BRICS may have today, the future of the grouping must also be understood in light of the Russia's weakened economic and political position today. Brazil, India and South Africa, while being staunch defenders of non-intervention, nevertheless have based their foreign policies of the last decades on being able to combine this position with close ties to Western powers. It is far from unthinkable that Russia's current position will push those three countries to collaborate more closely within the confines of IBSA, the grouping comprising the BRICS without the less democratic Russia and China. Such collaboration might involve less defiance towards the West, as the grouping is perceived as having a "shared identity" with more "normative power", as Andrew Cooper shows (2010:65). A policy towards emerging powers cannot be anchored solely around the BRICS, but must take into account other groupings and states as well as changing circumstances – both international and domestic – can dramatically alter the significance of these groupings.

A policy towards emerging powers must, for instance, also take into account the BRICSAM cooperation (or Heiligendamm 5, as they are often called with reference to the formalization of the process at the 2007 G-8 Summit in Heiligendamm) which also includes Mexico. Other groupings, more or less formalized, of which one needs to be mindful include "The Big Ten" list of countries "that will change our lives" proposed by Jeffrey Garten in 1997, which included Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, and Turkey. Another group of important countries is – again – Goldman Sachs' Next Eleven (or N-11), which consisted of states which were not on par with BRIC but were within reach of that level: Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, and Vietnam. Finally, one could

even make the case that a policy towards emerging powers ought to be mindful of states which do not figure on any of these groupings or categories, such as Japan.

Many of Norway's global initiatives are launched in partnership with these states, and many of them see themselves as "emerging" on the same level as the BRICS. A policy towards the BRICS should therefore not be at the expense of other groupings. On the other hand, if the BRICS continue their process of further institutionalization of the collaboration, they may force other states' hands in terms of relating to them as a group, or even as the representative group of emerging powers. In that sense labels do matter, and may prove to matter even more in the future.

On the other hand, the RIC cooperation comprising Russia, India and China has continued alongside the BRICS summits, and a possible backlash against Russia may make the RIC cooperation more compatible with Russian interests. At the recent Summit of the RIC foreign ministers, it was jointly underlined that in light of the "significant and rapid changes underway in the world" it was important that "the international community should remain committed to democratization of international relations and multi-polarity." They further stressed "the need to respect diversity of civilizations and the independent choice of development path and social system by the people of all countries, support peaceful settlement of disputes through political and diplomatic means." And "opposed forced regime change in any country from the outside, or imposition of unilateral sanctions based on domestic laws" (RIC Summit 2015).

### Emerging Powers in International Politics

While we are referring to emerging or rising powers when using the BRICS shorthand, it is important to note that the label is no definition of the term, and that by extension what the BRICS may have in common may not be the defining traits of emerging powers, which a foreign policy aimed at these countries needs to take into account. Yet, while emerging powers have become part of the taken-for-granted vocabulary of international affairs since the turn of the century there is little consensus as to what the term refers to.

While Realists may favor understandings which stratifies actors based on capabilities (see for instance Mearsheimer 2001), more institutionalist takes may favor understandings of powerhood and great power responsibility based on the norms and expectations of international society (the prime example here being Bull 1977). Yet, both understandings tend to downplay "transitional powers", that is, states between different status categories. How best to understand emerging powers, then, and what they represent? It is our contention here that emerging powers are clearly too important at the global level today to relegate them to the regional level, so, what distinguishes them from mere regional powers is that they are (following Buzan and Wæver 2004) *often* responded

to by others on the basis of system level calculations about the present and near-future distribution of power. Consequently, emerging powers are emerging from their regions and onto the global scene, and possess attributes or potential to bid for great power status in the short or medium term. There is of course a great empirical variety of emerging powers, as Hart and Jones (2011) have recently pointed out, with some being closer to achieving great power status than others. In spite of this, Andrew Hurrell, argued that in addition to economic growth, emerging powers possessed a number of common traits: they have high degree of (potential) military and political resources, internal cohesion, and “some ability to contribute to the generation of a revised international order.” They also have aspirations for a more influential role at the international level, and the relations among them have become stronger and more institutionalized. Finally, and this may be the most important criterion which traditional categorizations of powers omit, is the fact that “the rising powers were never fully integrated into the post-1945 order. Being on the outside looking in has heavily conditioned their strategic interests and conceptions of national purpose.” In assessing the current status and importance of the BRICS, this may very well be the most important characteristic. For a country like Norway, which is a staunch defender of the post 1945-order (Leira 2012), understanding the ambiguity with which the BRICS view this order, will be crucial for the ability to craft adequate and sensible policies; attuned both to Norwegian values and interests and the positions of the BRICS.

## References

- Barry, Buzan and Ole Wæver (2004) *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Bull, Hedley (1977) *The Anarchical Society: A Study in World Politics* (London: Macmillan Press)
- Cooper, Andrew F. (2010) “Labels Matter: Interpreting Rising States through Acronyms” in Alan S. Alexandroff and Andrew F. Cooper, eds., *Rising States, Rising Institutions: Challenges for Global Governance* (Washington, DC: Brookings)
- Hart, Andrew F. and Bruce D. Jones (2011) “How Do Rising Powers Rise?” *Survival* 52(6), pp. 63-88
- Hurrell, Andrew (2006) “Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order: What Space for Would-be Great Powers?” *International Affairs* 82(1), 1–19.
- Leira, Halvard (2012) “Drømmen om en ny utenrikspolitikk”, *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* 29(4): 382-393.
- John J. Mearsheimer (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton)
- RIC Summit (2015) *Joint Communiqué of the 13th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China*. 2 February 2015. Available at: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1233638.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1233638.shtml)
- Stuenkel, Oliver (2013) “Russia lays out its vision for the BRICS – others should, too” in *Post-Western World*. Available at <http://www.postwesternworld.com/2013/03/29/russia-lays-out-its-vision-for-the-brics-others-should-too/>



### About the Authors

**Benjamin de Carvalho** is Senior Research Fellow at NUPI and part of the Research Group on Foreign Policy and Diplomacy.

**Halvard Leira** is Senior Research Fellow at NUPI and leader of the Research Group on Foreign Policy and Diplomacy. He has published extensively on Norwegian foreign policy and diplomacy.

### NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway  
[www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no) | [info@nupi.no](mailto:info@nupi.no)

### Funding

Funding for this policy brief was provided for by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the project “Norway and the BRICS: Mapping Opportunities and Challenges”.