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China and BRICS: Dealing with Power Asymmetry in a Multipolar World

Abstract

A distinctive feature of the rise of the multipolar world order in the 21st century has been the proliferation of multilateral institutions. While the raison d'être of these institutions essentially remains elevating multilateral interests, as opposed to unilateral or even for that matter, bilateral interests, national interests continue to remain paramount. Even within multilateral institutions, states undertake various approaches to secure their own national interests over and above that of others. BRICS, a multilateral grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, in its conception is targeted towards reforming and filling up the space left by the West dominated structures of global governance. However, the power asymmetry inherent among the BRICS members creates traction that the Chinese require to wield the kind of influence that should concern other members, and certainly India. The dilemma of balancing common interest and national interest within multilateral organisations like the BRICS will be an eminent feature of the varied and multiple interest sets that countries have in an interdependent world. While countries will still find purpose, in the membership of multilateral institutions, the challenge of managing power asymmetry within those organisations will mean that countries find leverage through their engagement with countries outside those groups.

For China, the heavyweight within the group, BRICS has multiple purposes, one of them being the elevation of Chinese interests of opposing Western hegemony. However, for India, for which the grouping remains of pertinence (given its stress on addressing emerging and important global challenges such as those of economic development and sustainability) taking a position against the so-called dominance of the West or aligning itself with any particular country or group that stands in opposition to others is a dilemma.

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Introduction

Debates on the emerging multipolar structure of the international system have been synonymous with the rise of China. The discourse on America's relative decline and the rise of new power centres has been dominated by China's rise and the geopolitical implications it has had. A distinctive feature of the rise of the multipolar order in the twenty-first century has been the proliferation of multilateral institutions. While the *raison d'être* of these institutions essentially remains elevating multilateral interests, as opposed to unilateral or even for that matter, bilateral interests, national interests continue to remain paramount. Even within multilateral institutions, states undertake various approaches to secure their own national interests over and above that of others. BRICS, a multilateral grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, in its conception is targeted towards reforming and filling up the space left by the West dominated structures of global governance. However, BRICS grouping also has another equally important objective; which is to elevate the respective positions of each of these member countries' position in the international system. As such, BRICS faces a conundrum: how can it balance common interest with competition and power play within the group?

The BRICS countries clearly have a significant role to play in the emerging multipolar world order. The BRICS countries, in the last decade have contributed to 50 per cent of the global economic growth. India and China, have the highest growth rates in the grouping, and despite several avenues of disagreements in the bilateral relationship, they find ample scope for cooperation in the BRICS. However, the power asymmetry inherent among the BRICS members creates traction that the Chinese require to wield the kind of influence that should concern other members, and certainly India. China also intends on using the multilateral organisations like BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to sync them with larger objectives in projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, there has been a clear divergence between India and China, when it comes to countering terrorism, as Beijing often turns a blind eye to terrorists targeting India, emanating from Pakistan. Moreover, increasing U.S.-China strategic competition, the trade war between the two, nosediving U.S.-Russia relations and better ties between India and the U.S. creates a geo-political situation bringing Moscow and Beijing closer. China's opposition to India's candidature as a veto-wielding member of a reformed United Nations and India's membership shot at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) further create divergences between India and China beyond the existing tenacious boundary dispute.

Hence, China's position within the BRICS by dint of being the largest economy within the group remains an issue of policy concern that merits a conceptual analysis and assessment. This article attempts to carry out a conceptual inquiry into the notion of multilateralism and multilateral institutions as a feature of the emerging multipolar world order. Countries like China and India have openly projected that their interests will be better served in a multipolar world order. However, the practice of multilateralism through multilateral institutions in a multipolar world does not preclude the notion of power asymmetry. In case of multilateral organisations like the BRICS, China's economic size lends it a playing field, which could eat into the means by which other members would protect and promote their interest. As such, the article attempts to juxtapose the conceptual background with an empirical understanding of why China needs BRICS, how and why China dominates the BRICS and what it means for India. Last but not the least, the article also attempts to argue as to what all these mean for the future of BRICS multilateralism.

Incentivising Cooperation amidst Competition

How do countries like India and China whose interactions are usually identified with competition, if not conflict, incentivise cooperation? Besides their bilateral interactions and a number of confidence building measures, specifically over their border dispute, how do they use memberships and partnerships in multilateral institutions for building habits of cooperation? Are these efforts successful and how do they play out in the midst of strategic rivalry? Do multilateral institutions necessarily provide a way out from the security dilemma inherent in the relationship between India and China?¹ Multilateral institutions and multilateral ways of interstate arrangements have become the catchphrase of the emerging multipolar world order.² Robert Keohane defines multilateralism 'as the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions.'³ According to him, institutions are a 'persistent and connected sets of rules, formal and informal, that pre- scribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations.' Multilateral institutions, Keohane says are, "multilateral arrangements with persistent sets of rules; they can be distinguished from other forms of multilateralism, such as ad hoc meetings and short-term arrangements to solve particular problems." At the heart of institutions is also bargaining among the members of those institutions to align interests and common objectives. While bargaining may be geared towards a win-win scenario, the role of power in the process is undeniable.⁴

Since cooperation in a multilateral institution is not guaranteed but has to be negotiated at all times, to what extent influential members in a multilateral

institution might be able to and willing to negotiate the terms of arrangement to their favour and to the detriment of others remains a matter of discourse.⁵ The debate on an emerging multipolar world order has gained momentum in recent times. Though multipolarity comes with the notion of multiple centers of power, giving more space for creating leverages to protect and promote one's interest, it also does not prevent stronger powers in the system from using their predominant powers to advance their interests at the cost of others.⁶

Such predominance is also reflected in multilateral institutions, where a country that has contributed more material capabilities as opposed to other members might create more leverage for itself.⁷ Multilateral mechanisms and memberships in multilateral institutions are means in which countries create value out of cooperation. However, the paradox remains that countries, after all, are self-interested actors who would either spearhead the creation of certain multilateral institutions, or seek membership in them, only if it serves certain purposes.⁸ However, what are the circumstances in which the predominance of a country in multilateral institutions start diluting the multilateral ways of the institution? Does power asymmetry and the intentions of the leading country; limit the traction of other members? In what ways a predominant country set the agenda favourable to its own interests, and how conditions of power asymmetry constrain the negotiating space of other members?⁹ What are the incentives that a country, like China, with a substantial power of the purse, can give to other member countries in a multilateral set-up?

It is also fair to say that an aspiring hegemon would want to engineer various multilateral institutions and spearhead the decision-making, to make easier compliance and cooperation with other countries. Sustaining hegemony would require the maintenance of various multilateral mechanisms like the way the Americans spearheaded the Bretton Woods institutions post World War II. The farsightedness of a hegemon would not be in amassing power alone, but in managing the power through effective public distribution of goods.¹⁰ The leadership of multilateral institutions could be seen as a way to create legitimacy for predominance in the international system. The assumption that multilateralism naturally leads to cooperative behaviour and win-win outcomes has to be critically questioned in the context of the existence of power asymmetry within the institutions, and how stronger countries utilise that asymmetry. China's engagement in multilateral institutions reflects its pragmatic and realpolitik considerations. If multilateral organisations like the BRICS are the order of an emerging multipolar world order, then China's perception of BRICS as a major component of its rise and its external engagement is reflective of its intention to use BRICS to institutionalise its economic leadership of the global order. In an

increasingly interdependent world, multilateral organisations like the BRICS are imperative to coordinate the convergent interests and manage divergent ones. However, the efficacy of such institutions to generate “mutual benefits” is not preordained and China’s capability and intention to influence multilateral organizations like the BRICS to serve its own national interest will create more complexities for other member countries like India, which shares complex dynamics of competition and cooperation with China.¹¹ The following section will delve deeper into the question as to why China needs the BRICS.

China’s Prominence within the BRICS

China holds sway over all the other countries, be it in terms of its share in world trade or in terms of its GDP. A cursory look at statistics from WTO and IMF from 2017 reveals that while China’s share in world total exports was 12.77 per cent, Brazil’s share was 1.23, while it was 1.99 percent, 1.68 per cent and 0.50 per cent for Russia, India and South Africa respectively. In terms of GDP (purchasing power parity), Brazil’s was USD 3.240 trillion, Russia’s was USD 4.007 trillion, India’s was USD 9.459 trillion, South Africa’s was USD 765 billion, while China’s stood at the highest amongst the five at USD 23.159 trillion.¹²

In fact, China has just about enough money accumulated on its international reserves to equal the economic output of Brazil, Russia and South Africa.¹³ Its state owned enterprises (SOEs) have the funding to buy strategic assets abroad like water, oil and gas infrastructure. Brazil’s dependence on China has been revealed by an examination of the bilateral trade between the two countries. Overall, trade between China and Brazil has seen a positive evolution in the decade 2006–2016. From a trade volume of approximately US\$ 20 billion in 2006, trade increased to approximately US\$ 68 billion in 2016. This means that, from 2006 to 2016, the volume of trade between the two countries more than tripled.¹⁴ Agribusiness is one of the largest sectors of the Brazilian economy. The country leads the rankings in soybean exports and is known worldwide for meat and oil exports.¹⁵ Brazil is immensely dependent on China for its soybeans and iron ore exports. In fact, in May 2017, the two countries launched a joint investment fund to increase productive capacity, and the fund reportedly will finance investment projects in Brazil that are of interest to both the sides.

China is already Russia’s largest trading partner, offsetting any impact of geopolitical uncertainty from the West. Bilateral trade grew from US\$ 69.6 billion in 2016 to US\$ 107.1 billion last year, with China as Russia’s largest individual partner in both exports and imports.¹⁶ President Xi Jinping has visited Moscow more than any other capital since he assumed power. Last June, he awarded Russian President Vladimir Putin China’s first-ever friendship medal,

honouring him as “my best, most intimate friend”.¹⁷ Commodities supply, opposition to what they perceive as attempts at Western hegemony, and a purported desire for a multipolar world are the commonalities driving the bilateral engagement between Russia and China. India’s imports are heavily dependent on China, and the bilateral trade in 2017 rose by 18.63 per cent year-on-year to reach USD 84.44 billion.¹⁸ South Africa is China’s biggest trading partner in the African continent and it needs Chinese investment and Chinese buyers for its raw materials, and China is its biggest export market, accounting for around USD 12 billion.¹⁹

Therefore, the economic clout, which enabled China’s rise at the international stage, is the same factor underlying China’s preponderance within the BRICS, which enables it over others to steer the direction of the BRICS as per its worldview. However, for a country like India, which has its own perception of global politics and is an important pole in the current international order, such preponderance of China has implications, which might not be in the positive. The following section looks at the implications of Chinese preponderance in the BRICS has for India.

Why China Needs the BRICS?

An observation of China’s membership of organisations reveals a sharp contrast between the initial decades post liberation, and those of the 2000s. By 2000, China had become a member of over 50 intergovernmental organisations and 1275 international nongovernmental organisations, and this was in sharp contrast with the situation in 1966 when it was a member of only one intergovernmental organisation and 58 international nongovernmental organizations.²⁰ This change in membership has been underlined with China’s changing attitude towards international organizations. China formally recognises international organizations as subjects of international law, but does not accord them a supranational status, in the way a political entity would have it. An example of this lies in the way China rejected the Hague Tribunal’s ruling on China’s aggressive claims in the South China Sea, and China questioned even the basis of existence of the tribunal.²¹ However, at the same time, China is increasingly acquiring memberships of international, regional and multilateral organizations. It has even been creating organisations to rally around causes that it deems fit for lobbying in the international arena. Therefore, on the one hand, China looks to organisations to confer international prestige, status and domestic legitimacy, while on the other it prefers to usage of bilateral mechanisms for the resolution of interstate or intrastate conflicts,²² viewing international relations from a realist perspective over a liberal one.

The interesting aspect about China's attitude towards organisations can be seen in the ones that it has created and is the most powerful member of in the grouping. An example of this is the BRICS grouping. While the origins of the grouping go back to 2001 when the economic growth rates of the member countries were the highest in the world, fact remains that the five countries have nothing to bind them together. They are in four different continents, have different political as well as market structures and are no longer the fastest growing economies in the world. Growth rates of these five countries' economies have slid from over 8 and 9 per cent to a best case of slightly above 6 per cent to a worst case of under 4 per cent.²³ In 2015, Goldman Sachs itself folded its BRICS fund into a general emerging market fund on the grounds that this fund lost almost 88 per cent of its assets since a 2010 peak.²⁴ At best, the group has become a multilateral forum for China to establish some form of new global order. For China, the Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) represent the status quo, which is why it has been actively promoting multilateral forums like the BRICS.

A closer look at the 10th edition of the BRICS summit held in 2018 as well as the 11th edition held in 2019 reveals how the BRICS is an important platform for China. The BRICS countries, at the end of the three-day summit in 2018 stated that they want a fairer and more representative global order in diplomacy and trade.²⁵ They also stated that they seek reforms at the United Nations, UN Security Council (UNSC) and the IMF for better representation of developing countries and have asked that the members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), including the US abide by its rules. The organisations wherein changes have been sought are all Western ones.

The 11th BRICS Summit's declaration is no different, and it uses the exact same words regarding reforms of the UN system as had been in 2018. The statement pertaining to the reform of the UN is as follows:

We recall the 2005 World Summit Outcome document and reaffirm the need for a comprehensive reform of the UN, including its Security Council, with a view to making it more representative, effective and efficient, and to increase the representation of the developing countries so that it can adequately respond to global challenges. China and Russia reiterate the importance they attach to the status and role of Brazil, India and South Africa in international affairs and support their aspiration to play a greater role in the UN.²⁶

However, despite reiteration of the same fact year after year in the BRICS Declarations, ground realities remain different. Even though China also calls

for a reform of the UN, the irony lies in the fact that it actively blocks India's candidature at the UNSC and there are reservations in both China as well as Russia regarding an expansion of the UNSC to include more developing countries, which will make the UN more representational.²⁷ The tone in BRICS declarations has been heavily weighing in favour of the agenda China. In 2018, the BRICS summit was taking place with backdrop of the trade war between the U.S. and China, because of which there were repeated references made to the necessity for free trade. 2019 was no different and at the 11th BRICS Summit held in Brasilia, veiled references to the U.S.' withdrawal from multilateralism was evident. In a separate section titled 'economic and financial cooperation', the 11th BRICS declaration mentioned how since the last meeting, global economic growth has weakened and downside risks have increased as trade tensions and policy uncertainty have taken a toll on confidence, trade, investment and growth.²⁸ Out of the five countries in the grouping, the country that has benefited the most from an export led growth model and international trade is China. Therefore, even though the other four have been impacted by the slowing economy and the US' attempts at import substitution, China has been hit the worst. Therefore, being the most dominant member of the grouping, its concerns come up more often than those of the others.

Free trade again ironically is something that China does not really permit when it comes to imports in to China, as revealed by the IMF's annual report card on the Chinese economy, which criticises the pervasive role of the state in the economy and the restrictive trade and investment regime of the country.²⁹ Nevertheless, through the BRICS, China signalled to the world that it is building a coalition of emerging markets that seek to defend the current multilateral trade regime.

In the summits held earlier, as stated by Martyn Davies, managing director for emerging markets and Africa at Deloitte, there has never been an agenda before, and BRICS as a group talking about liberalised trade has never been witnessed.³⁰ Now trade is at the front and foremost. The full text of the declaration mentions the terms "free" and "trade" the maximum number of times over and above the others.³¹ The case is the same even in the 2019 declaration. Therefore, even though the BRICS is a symbol of multilateralism, it is clear that even within multilateral organisations, there is bound to be the preponderance of the most powerful countries- in the case of BRICS, it is China. The point to note nevertheless is that this is not the first time that the declarations have political underpinnings.³² Even in the past declarations, what has been witnessed is an inclination to counter the Western dominance in global institutions. However, over the years, China has loomed large over the content of the declarations.

For example, stated already, 2018 and 2019 have been characterised by the trade spat between the US and China, which is why the reference to free trade in the BRICS declaration. The previous year, China called for the inclusion of more like-minded countries in the BRICS grouping.³³ While expansion of the grouping helps China enlarge its group against Western institutions and in tilting the balance of power in its favour, fact remains that for members like India, expansion of the grouping is not of much pertinence. Therefore, until the previous summits, the grouping was of use for China for the formation of an anti-West coalition, which as seen in recent summits has now also become about agenda setting. The question, which emerges from this, is how China comes to be the agenda setter or have a more prominent stature within the BRICS over the other members.

Implications for India

India and China are the two lynchpins of the BRICS grouping in terms of economic growth rates and trade. However, the relationship between these two countries is fraught with tensions. To begin with, while China emphasises on free trade, Indian products in China suffer enormous tariff as well as non-tariff barriers and despite decades of calling China's attention, the balance of trade continues to weigh heavily in China's favour.³⁴ For China, ensuring its continued economic growth is essential, given the fact that its clout in the international system is based on its economic might. Therefore, continued as well as larger access for Chinese products in different markets across the globe is of utmost importance for China. For India, which is attempting to unleash its manufacturing prowess through programmes such as Make in India, similar access for Indian products is essential. However, most markets are saturated with Chinese products, and within the Chinese market, Indian products suffer trade distortions.

Additionally, while at BRICS summits, China speaks of a more just international order and reforms of institutions, fact remains that it actively blocks India's participation at forums such as the UNSC or the NSG. This actually symbolises Chinese double speak and the lack of a suitable Indian response so far to counter the double speak.

China's ability to steer the entire BRICS discourse to an agenda that it deems fit is also of concern for India. For example, the anti-West stance taken by the BRICS, spearheaded by China at last year's summit is not something that works perfectly for India. For India, a strong working relationship with the West is critical to its autonomous material development, and for furthering its regional and global aspirations. Similarly, the idea of BRICS plus floated by China at last year's summit would negatively impact India, as the BRICS

grouping would lose its focus after expansion and it would get reduced to a political platform for furthering Chinese global aspirations! While China expands its influence by inviting its allies, India would not just endanger its friendships in the West due to the increasingly anti-West stance Beijing would propagate, India's role and voice within the grouping itself also might get lost.

As has been previously witnessed, China's clout within the BRICS has led to India's concerns being swept under the rug. Despite the rhetoric on counter terrorism, India's efforts to call out China's all weather friend Pakistan for its anti-India terrorist outfits at the international stage has often met the Chinese wall.³⁵ Another example where Chinese influence within the BRICS has not worked to India's advantage is that if the New Development Bank. Even though it was India, which proposed the idea of the Bank under BRICS, China through some hefty diplomacy was able to get the Bank established in Shanghai. A hegemonic status of China within the BRICS clearly does not cater well for India and in no way can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. The need is that the BRICS countries pin down China on long terms norm based values, ideas and concrete proposals and programmes for the mutual benefit of the constituent member states!³⁶

Wither BRICS Multilateralism

The Chinese government has often promoted multipolarity as an order more commensurate with a 'harmonious world' as opposed to unipolar dominance by the United States. China's support for a multipolar world order has been seen as reflected in its promotion of multilateral institutions. However, as argued, the overwhelming volume of the Chinese economy compared to the other BRICS member countries including India, portends a strategic concern for India. China espouses a harmony between its support for multilateral institutions and a 'fairer' world order. However, many view China's approach as one that emphasises the promotion and protection of its national interests over anything else, which entails more bargaining power for itself, improve its economic profile and contain the predominance of the United States, more particularly in the economic domain.³⁷

While China, by dint of the sheer size of its material capabilities, is taken as an inevitable member of many multilateral institutions in the world, its intention to be a responsible player in regional and global agenda setting is still viewed with scepticism. Its intransigent approach towards the contentious South China Sea dispute, its hesitancy to take efforts to correct the imbalance in its bilateral trade with India and its constant refusal to support India's candidature for a permanent seat at the UNSC raises a number of questions on China's approach

to multilateralism and multilateral institutions. There is no doubt that a member of any multilateral organization such as the BRICS would do their own cost-benefit analysis of what they give and get by becoming a part of such groups.

However, the dynamism of the differing capabilities and the power asymmetry it creates within those groups presents a foreign policy dilemma for the weaker powers. Rising economies like India and China do have a convergent interest in making sure that the global financial structure does not remain dominated by the American and Western European economies. However, for India, a global financial structure dominated by the Chinese economy will not augur well as far as maintaining India's independent decision-making is concerned. The Chinese government propagates its support for multilateral organisations like the BRICS as being in commensurate with its notion of 'peaceful rise'.

Member countries like India have found it difficult to negotiate its own influence in the international system through the BRICS forum; as in the case of China's reticence to discuss the issue of UNSC reform with permanent seat aspirants like India and Brazil.³⁸ As such, there is an apparent dilemma of managing power asymmetry in multilateral organisations, which is palpable in terms of China's position within the BRICS. The dilemma of balancing common interest and national interest within multilateral organisations like the BRICS will be an eminent feature of the varied and multiple interest sets that countries have in an interdependent world. While countries will still find purpose, in the membership of multilateral organisations, the challenge of managing power asymmetry within those organizations will mean that countries find leverage through their engagement with countries outside those groups. This is clearly reflected in the limitations of India-China cooperation within the BRICS and India's engagement with a country like the United States, whose dominance in the global financial structure, groups like the BRICS wants to challenge.

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