

BRICS' Pursuit of Multipolarity: Response in the United States

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Abstract. In the last few years, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries have been increasingly investing in developing their cooperation and seeking to exert joint global influence. BRICS' mobilization has been visible in the cooperation of high-level officials, deeper policy coordination and investments in BRICS-related scholarship. As the BRICS intensify their pursuit of multipolarity, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ways in which the BRICS has been received in the United States (US), which is a crucial stakeholder in creating a multipolar system. How is the BRICS represented in U.S. foreign policy circles? This article examines the state of the U.S. debate on the BRICS, drawing on the perspectives from foreign policy officials, top think tanks and academics. It argues that there is a considerable gap between BRICS' multipolar aspirations and the perceptions of the grouping's promise and potential in the US. The BRICS is often marginalized in the US as an entity, and - even if accepted as such - it is considered ineffective in terms of its results. However, the BRICS benefits U.S. foreign policy development: it challenges U.S. officials to clarify their message on multipolarity; it reframes the debate from bilateral China vs. US competition to multilateral processes of providing global public goods; and, it generates a subfield of BRICS studies, which internationalizes the production and consumption of knowledge in the field of global politics.

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1. Introduction: BRICS' Multipolar Aspirations

U.S. scholars and policymakers have spent decades examining “emerging” or “rising” powers and envisioning the role of the US when these powers potentially emerge. What do these powers want? How can they get it? What are the implications for the US and the world? These are the core questions underlying the puzzle of their rise. Answers to these questions are complex. They depend on the new powers’ interests, their evolving values, and their ability to act together. Some new powers are eager to have a seat at the table occupied by “old” powers - India or Brazil’s aspirations for a membership in the UN Security Council is a case in point. China envisions rejuvenation or return to past greatness, and Russia seeks to reclaim the key role in world politics. And then others like South Africa emphasize redistribution of power between the North and the South. The strength of the BRICS as a grouping lies in identifying and pursuing a common aspiration of all of these new powers – multipolarity. Despite their numerous differences, BRICS countries have one thing in common: resistance to a unipolar world order where the US is a hegemonic power that intervenes where it wants around the world, sets the terms of conduct and seeks to ensure global stability.¹

The BRICS’ vision of multipolarity builds on the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, in which the two countries commit to strive to promote the “multipolarization of the world” and a new order where “no country should seek hegemony, engage in power politics of monopolize international affairs.”² It also builds on the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), a coordinating mechanism established in 2003. The three IBSA countries with democratic credentials have been using the forum to contribute to the construction of a new international architecture and increase their capacity of acting on a global scale on global issues.³ BRIC as a grouping (which later included South Africa) has sought to establish “a more democratic and just multipolar order based on the rule of international law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making of all states.”⁴ The BRICS’ leadership aspirations led to turning an occasional grouping into a process of increasingly deeper and broader cooperation over the past few years. There has been a proliferation of platforms for BRICS cooperation ranging from summit-level meetings to ministerial coordination mechanisms and private actors’ cooperation. At the same time, the emphasis on functional cooperation and knowledge-based policymaking has created a constituency of professionals with an interest in seeing the BRICS evolve.

As the BRICS’ efforts to design a multipolar world intensify, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ways in which the BRICS have been received in the US. The BRICS’ mobilization necessarily requires that the grouping acts against the perceived U.S. hegemony. The BRICS has already been jointly working on diversifying away from the dollar in the monetary realm and increasing the diversity in the leadership of international organizations. Numerous other projects are on the way including the creation of an independent internet. BRICS’ mobilization is a high stakes issue for U.S. foreign policy because not only can it affect U.S. national interest but also its broader vision of the international system. While the BRICS’ desire for leadership is clearly articulated, how is the BRICS represented in the U.S. foreign policy circles? Is there a U.S. response to or a policy toward the BRICS? This article analyzes the BRICS’ pursuit of multipolarity from a U.S. perspective. It examines the nature of the U.S. policy debate on the BRICS by investigating whether and how the BRICS is discussed in the key foreign policymaking bodies; whether it is on the agenda of the top U.S. think tanks and how it is studied in the U.S. scholarship. It seeks to reveal the actors and platforms through which the BRICS enters the U.S. policy debate and provoke a larger debate on the BRICS-related (counter) mobilization in the US.

This article finds that various U.S. constituencies often marginalize the BRICS as an entity, and - even if they accept it as such – they consider it ineffective in terms of its results and potential contribution to providing global public goods. Although extensively debated in a few top think tanks and emerging in academia, the BRICS is a non-issue in terms of official foreign policymaking. Yet, as this article argues,

the relevance of the BRICS for the U.S. foreign policy development should not be underestimated. The BRICS challenges foreign policy officials to develop a coherent U.S. response to multipolarity and reframes the debate from bilateral China vs. US competition to multilateral processes of multilateral processes of providing global public goods. It also generates a subfield of BRICS studies, which internationalizes the production and consumption of knowledge in the field of global politics. The article is organized as follows: the first part introduces the BRIC as a “made in the U.S.A.” concept and its subsequent de-Americanization. Other parts examine the BRICS as a category from U.S. foreign policy officials’ perspectives (part 2); in the broader policy debate (part 3); and, in the context of academic trajectories for its study (part 4). The final part concludes and offers suggestions for further study (part 5).

1. U.S. Origins of the BRIC and the Question of a U.S. Response to the BRICS

Most of the articles about the BRICS start by explaining how the BRICS was originally the BRIC (without South Africa), a “made in the U.S.A.” category invented by Jim O’Neill. This investment banker from Goldman Sachs used the label to describe larger emerging market economies with prospects of continued relative growth and argue that in line with these prospects, world policymaking forums including the G7 should be re-organized and incorporate BRIC representatives.⁵ Comparing emerging powers to current powers has become a fashion, where analysts continuously calculate the years by which the BRIC(S) will catch up or overtake G7 as global engines of growth.⁶ The number of BRIC(S)-focused business reports has been rapidly expanding, and many U.S. business schools have been offering concentrations and courses on the BRIC(S). International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports highlighted these countries’ economic relevance by documenting their growth trajectories and reinforcing the notion of an economic power shift.⁷ BRICS’ growth credentials have been brought into question as most recent data points out their sharp slowdown, and the IMF is now forecasting the BRICS economies to be 8-14% smaller in 2016 than it predicted just two years ago.⁸ This raises doubts that the BRICS can sustain fast growth and that the current situation reflects cyclical problems rather than serious structural impediments to growth. A strong voice in the “end of the BRICS” debate has been Morgan Stanley’s Rumir Sharma, who argued that the BRICs’ joint growth momentum had passed, and that it was not sustainable as these countries generated growth in different and often competing ways and, China apart, had limited trade ties with one another.⁹ Similarly, Subramanian argued that “the common dynamism they had is coming under question.”¹⁰ Investment analysts have turned to new acronyms emphasizing other emerging markets such as the Next-11 group (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, South Korea and Vietnam) or the MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey).

The debate on the BRICS as an economic category has thrived in the US, and even now – several years after these countries have been operating as a political grouping – the BRICS’ performance and potential are often measured by economic standards. Yet to what extent is the BRICS as a grouping dependent on these countries’ joint growth momentum? Are the BRICS more than the sum of their economic potentials? Notwithstanding its U.S. origins as an economic category, the BRIC has significantly de-Americanized over the past few years through its membership policies and joint political engagement. First, the BRIC and now the BRICS itself does not use economic standards as a requirement to enter or stay in the grouping. South Africa’s entry is economically questionable: although it is Africa’s largest economy, South Africa is too small an economy in global terms or compared to other BRIC, especially China, and it would, as O’Neill argued, need productivity improvements and immigration or improvements in birth rates to constitute a BRIC.¹¹ Yet as a regional power, it is politically relevant as an entry point into the African continent; and, it offers vast opportunities for increasing the BRIC’s influence. Similarly, the grouping does not review and renew countries’ membership based on their economic performance and does not yet have policies in place to address their economic failures or support economic outliers. The second aspect of de-Americanizing the BRIC as an economic category lies in its effort to exercise independent political influence. Instead of being an object of U.S. investors’

interest or a possible addition to the G-8, the BRICS grouping has become the main actor or a subject in the key global governance debates. This is particularly true with respect to reforming the financial architecture, but also in the security, trade and other issue areas. Often asked question why the BRIC countries have responded to a U.S. acronym therefore calls for a complementary question: what is the U.S. response to the BRICS?

BRICS' ability to exert leadership and bring about a multipolar world order depends on followers, including the U.S., which need to accept multipolarity. The US is an unlikely follower of the BRICS because of its superpower status and because followership requires credible inclusion of its interests and/or ideas into the leadership project.¹² Although some BRICS countries are closer to the US and more likely to take into account its interests than others, the BRICS as a grouping is not eager to incorporate U.S. interests into its leadership project. On the contrary, the BRICS has sought to distinguish itself from the US approach to the international system and question the legitimacy of its interests, values and influence. The prospects for a joint US-BRICS approach to multipolarity may exist in some issue areas in global governance, but it cannot be assumed that transition to multipolarity will be based on mutually beneficial cooperation. The BRICS' leadership challenge is the one of exercising "go-it-alone power"¹³ where the grouping restricts the options available to the US, altering the rules of the game such that the US is better off playing by the new rules despite its strong preference for the original rules. If the BRICS manages to exert agenda control, multipolarity emerges because the US cannot opt out: cooperating with the BRICS is better than the alternative – being excluded. Such a scenario is a high stakes issue for U.S. foreign policy.

To what extent is the rise of the BRICS considered a leadership project in the U.S. foreign policy community? Is it a foreign policy problem or an opportunity to transition the system toward multipolarity? The possibility of a decline of U.S. power is not new. It has been extensively debated whether the U.S. ascendancy in global politics that began in 1945 is over, and whether the world is preparing for an era after hegemony or a post-American world.¹⁴ China is often portrayed as the only contender to U.S. hegemony, even to the extent that its rise entails the U.S. decline.¹⁵ For some, the decline of U.S. influence may result in a G-zero world or an emerging vacuum of power in international politics.¹⁶ For others, the notion of what comes next is less clear: it is often represented as a sort of G+ thinking such as G2 (US and China as dominant superpowers) or G20 (leadership through a concert of old and new powers). The rise of the BRICS as a political force creates a new situation where multipolarity is strategically pursued, and the U.S. has an option of preventing the BRICS momentum or using it to make desired changes in the international system. As foreign policy theorists suggest, how foreign policy decision-makers define a situation significantly affects how they choose to deal with it, so where to look for a U.S. response to the BRICS?¹⁷ This article conducts a three-layered analysis. First, it investigates official foreign policymaking bodies and analyzes how the government represents the BRICS. Then, it examines BRICS commentary in the broader foreign policy elite, focusing on the recent policy debate and think tank engagement with the BRICS. Finally, it analyzes how the BRICS is represented in the U.S. academia. Data is drawn from publicly available information from government websites and think tanks as well as BRICS-related policy and academic articles.

2. BRICS as a Political Category: A Non-Issue for Official U.S. Foreign Policymakers?

Public officials engaged in foreign policymaking have often reflected on the U.S. role in the context of emerging economies. This is particularly the case with the Obama administration, which came to power with a decidedly more multilateral outlook than the previous Bush administration. President Obama's international outreach was accompanied with Vice President Biden's explicit statements that "(we) are trying to build a multipolar world."¹⁸ At the same time, President Obama has been clear that there is a strong economic competition for dominance among the US, China and India. In his 2010 State of the

Union address, he argued that the US should not wait with tackling larger economic challenges because China, Germany or India were not waiting to revamp their economies or playing for the second place, and that he did not accept second place for the US.¹⁹ The Secretary of State Clinton sought to describe U.S. leadership aspirations in more detail. She said that the U.S. “will lead by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors and reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world.”²⁰ She explained in another context; “(w)e went from a bipolar world that ended when the wall came down here in Berlin, and we want a multi-partner world where we can make common cause on transnational challenges like climate change or H1N1 influenza, and where we can bring partners to the table on some of the difficult security challenges.”²¹ Partnership framing not only dilutes the competition language, but it is useful as it incorporates non-state partners. However, State Department’s reports reinforced the use of the term multipolarity. For example a 2010 report acknowledged that “(t)he world economy has become more multi-polar, including the “BRIC” economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China that seek greater influence in the international system.”²²

BRICS has been rarely discussed in official foreign policy circles, particularly in the context of these countries becoming the new poles in the international system. For example, the White House website search for the term BRIC yields nine results and for term BRICS yields only five, and BRIC(S) is mentioned either in passing, by foreign leaders or without any reflection on the BRICS’ proposals or the US policy toward it.²³ The search for the term BRIC(S) on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs does not yield a single result.²⁴ The same search on the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations yields six results and BRIC(S) is discussed in greater length only in testimonies with respect to the US policy toward BRICs larger role in global economic management; BRIC(S)’ role in the context of the Eurozone crisis and its participation in the “new scramble” for Africa.²⁵ At the U.S. Department of State website, the BRICS is neither classified as a “topic” nor as a “policy issue,” and a general search for the term BRIC yields 111 results, including twelve dead links and numerous uses of the term as an economic category or in passing.²⁶ When foreign policy officials address the BRICS, they talk about it with caution and frame it in a positive way. For example, asked to comment whether the new BRICS’ development bank might challenge the role of the World Bank and U.S. interests, a State Department official responded that that was “something we’re going to have to look at.”²⁷ Asked to comment on the outcome of the BRICS summit in Delhi in 2012, another official said “we’ve reviewed the leaders’ Delhi declaration and believe that their efforts to engage in global multilateral institutions productively can only strengthen the international system.”²⁸ When another official was asked about the BRICS summit in 2012 and differences regarding sanctions against Iran, she downplayed the BRICS arguing that it is only one of the dialogues among multiple regional and global organizations.²⁹ Similarly, when asked about BRICS accusing NATO of exceeding the UN mandate in Libya or blocking the UN resolution on Syria, another official underscored the U.S. position and deflected the BRICS question.³⁰

Several officials have been directly confronted with questions about the BRICS as an entity and the U.S. policy toward it. In March 2012, an interviewer asked Assistant Secretary Gordon: “Do you think that BRICs can be an equal partner of so-called West? And is U.S. ready to handle it as a single power, as a single player?” He responded: “I don’t think it is a single player. Clearly each of the countries under the rubric BRICs is very important. Each is growing in important ways -- economically, politically, strategically, and we have increasingly important relations with all of them. So there is no question that that’s an important development in world affairs. But I don’t think we see BRICs as a single entity in any way. I don’t think the BRICs would believe that they are a single entity. They have many common interests but they also have a lot of differences in so many ways. So I think that would be not just premature, but a misreading of the situation to imagine that BRICs should be treated as a single entity.”³¹ In 2011, Assistant Secretary Blake was asked to assess whether the BRIC was something the U.S. should be worried about, and he answered: “Not at all. These are all countries with which we have good relations and I think it’s natural for them to have a dialogue. We certainly welcome that dialogue. Of course we’re pursuing strong relations with every single one of those countries.”³² Pushed further to answer whether

the U.S. felt excluded, he responded “We don’t see that as a threat. And no, we’re not seeking membership in the BRIC or anything like that.”³³

While the political competition is being officially dismissed, State Department’s activity in the EU shows a different picture. For example when Under-Secretary Hormats visited the EU in 2010, he sent a clear message about the need for the US and the EU to work more robustly together:

“The emergence of a new group of economic powerhouses—principally, but not only, the BRICs—demonstrates the need for new forums and partnerships. These countries should assume responsibilities for the global economic system commensurate with their growing role in it and the increasing benefits they derive from it. They are important markets for our products as well as strong competitors. They also can provide large amounts of foreign investment funds which can boost employment in America and Europe. (...) But we also have to avoid circumstances in which competition with these countries for markets, energy, capital, food, or water that is seen as a zero sum game. Consistent with that principle, we also need to avoid circumstances in which countries engage in systematic efforts—inconsistent with global rules and norms—to enhance prospects for their domestic economics or national champions at the expense of others. Such practices would cause enormous economic harm to the international economic system; in some cases it also could have serious political and security consequences. (...) While the U.S., France, and other European countries engage emerging powers, we must work even more robustly together in pursuit of our common core economic interests and values with respect to third countries in other fora such as the US-EU Summit and the TEC. If we do not act in concert, some emerging economies by setting unilaterally rules and standards and conditions for sales to their governments, or preconditions requiring transfers of intellectual property, will exploit our differences to their own advantage.”³⁴

In the official foreign policy circles, the BRICS is a non-issue as a political category, and there is no official policy on the BRICS. State Department is the only agency where the BRICS is frequently mentioned and where officials’ representations of it can be assessed. U.S. officials rarely volunteer to talk about the BRICS and when they do, they do not acknowledge it as a serious political entity and do not want to substantively reflect on the BRICS’ joint actions. The State Department has been frequently using the BRIC as an economic term to identify countries undergoing economic takeoff, and its public relations team seems uninformed about what the BRICS represents as a political grouping and how the term is written. For example, the BRICS is often misspelled as the BRICs after 2010.³⁵ Similarly, the deputy spokesperson suggested that the BRICS “have been around for a few years as a multilateral organization,” which is an overstatement given the grouping’s lack of secretariat.³⁶ Since various State Department officials are increasingly asked to comment on the BRICS’ joint actions, they will need to display greater consistency and knowledge about the BRICS in their responses whether they choose to address it or marginalize it. An even deeper problem for the official foreign policy community lies in the messy multipolarity/multi-partnership rhetoric. U.S. officials argue that foreign and economic relations are indivisible and that the challenge is to “advance global leadership at a time when power is more often measured and exercised in economic terms.”³⁷ At the same time, there is a message of competition and rankings on the economic front and a message of cooperation and partnering on the political front, which gets diluted and even more confusing the more officials get involved. Although there is no doubt that the Obama administration sought to disassociate itself from a neoconservative notion of unipolarity, it has not found a coherent replacement. It remains unclear whether any or all of the BRICS are poles or partners and how the US envisions the new world order in the context of the grouping’s multipolar aspirations.

3. BRICS in the Policy Debate

Examining how the US responds to the BRICS is necessarily limited because it is a question for the foreign policy elite, rather than the general public. Understanding what the U.S. public thinks about the BRICS would be difficult because the BRICS is a rather recent development; it is not well understood even among professionals; and, it has not yet made a visible impact on the lives of everyday Americans. There are no public surveys about U.S. attitudes toward the BRICS. However, U.S. attitudes toward the rise of China, the U.S. leadership and the global balance of power are being extensively examined. For example, a 2012 Pew Center Research survey found that about three-quarters (74%) of the public favors a shared leadership role for the U.S.; 9% say the U.S. should be the single world leader, while 12% say it should have no leadership role at all.³⁸ Foreign policy analysts and commentators question the relevance of even talking about the BRICS, and the lack of consensus on joint projects like the new development bank reinforces this sentiment.

As Allison argues, the acronym is an analytic liability: “If a banner is required for a meeting of these five nations, or for a forecast about their economic and political weight in the world ahead, BRICS is much closer to the reality. Even if governments, investment banks, and newspapers keep using BRICS, thoughtful readers will think China and the rest.”³⁹ Wolf said: “There’s no reason whatsoever to expect them to agree on anything substantive in the world, except that the existing dominating powers should cede some of their influence and power.”⁴⁰ Nye argued that the BRICS meeting in Durban only illustrated the countries’ disagreements about the Bank and reinforced his opinion that BRICS was not likely to become a serious political organization of like-minded states.⁴¹ Rodrik argued that BRICS’ focus on infrastructure finance represented a 1950’s view of economic development, and that these countries have so far played a rather unimaginative and timid role in international forums such as the G-20 or the World Trade Organization.⁴² He questioned whether the BRICS could potentially “articulate a new global narrative that emphasizes the real economy over finance, policy diversity over harmonization, national policy space over external constraints and social inclusion over technocratic elitism.”⁴³

An examination of the BRICS as an issue on the agenda of the top ten U.S. think tanks sheds further light on the BRICS’ relevance in the policy debate. Out of the top ten U.S. think tanks, BRICS has been consistently on the agenda of only a few of them.⁴⁴ The Brookings Institution and the Council of Foreign Relations stand out with continuous engagement with the BRICS as well as efforts to convene scholars from the BRICS and global governance experts. Although outside academia, these two institutions are probably the closest parallel to the vision of the Centers for BRICS studies in BRICS countries, as they are rethinking the role of the US in the global order with respect to rising powers and producing policy-relevant research and commentary. The Brookings Institution has published extensively on the BRICS and especially on India in the global order, and Managing Global Order Project has been the focal point for discussing the US - rising powers relationship. The Project’s director, Bruce Jones, has been actively engaged in the study of rising powers and the changing role of the US from “the CEO of Free World Inc,” to “the largest minority shareholder in Global Order LLC.”⁴⁵ The Council of Foreign Relations has been engaged in BRICS-related commentary in 2012 and 2013 in particular, and BRICS countries have been on the agenda of the International Institutions and Global Governance Program through its Emerging Powers and International Institutions Meeting Series. Yet the idea that the BRICS countries are the new poles in the multipolar world has not been adopted: the head of this program himself argued in 2012 for looking beyond BRICS.⁴⁶ Other Council’s scholars have challenged the very ideas of poles and dominance of any specific power, arguing that 21st century world is “no one’s world” – it is interdependent, without a center of gravity and exhibits diversity and alternative conceptions of domestic and international order that compete and coexist on the global stage.⁴⁷

Other top think tanks have also contributed to the debate. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has been actively engaged in the BRICS debate, particularly through its flagship journal *Washington Quarterly*, which recently published a piece by the Center’s fellow criticizing BRICS as an

exaggerated narrative and a coalition where China tries to tilt the balance of power towards itself.⁴⁸ Peterson Institute for International Economics discussed BRICS in the economic context, with rare commentary on the political potential of BRICS – one of its members argued that Russia needed to aim higher than the BRICS and focus on the EU as a more ambitious peer group.⁴⁹ Woodrow Wilson Center publishes commentaries on the BRICS, particularly from individual country perspectives (e.g., Brazil and Russia), and its Kennan Institute organized a conference “BRICS: Shaping the New Governance Architecture” in November 2011. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published an occasional piece on the BRICS before 2013, but then after the BRICS 2013 Summit there has been more opinion pieces and debate on the threat of the development bank and the dynamics of India-China relationship under the BRICS. BRICS has not been a relevant issue on other top think tanks’ current agendas (Rand Corporation and American Enterprise Institute) or it was dismissed as unable to challenge U.S. leadership (Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute).⁵⁰

The BRICS’ overall presence in the policy debate has grown especially with the BRICS’ initiative to create a new development bank as the most tangible indicator of their seriousness. Yet based on the analysis of the top think tanks, the BRICS largely remains a curiosity, treated occasionally by a number of commentators, and there are no programs or projects specifically on the BRICS. The BRICS is seen as an experiment in cooperation rather than a real entity that can reorganize the world order in a meaningful way. It is questionable whether the BRICS are the right countries to study and whether China’s relative power is a barrier to the evolution of the grouping. Additional analysis should examine other think tanks focused on individual country or regional developments as their BRICS-focus may be less obvious – for example, the Eurasia Center launched the first annual “Doing Business with the BRICS” conference in 2013.

4. U.S. Academia: Embracing the BRICS?

In the U.S. academia, the question of BRICS’ multipolar ambitions and a possible U.S. response is a question of applied international affairs scholarship. It is not a natural fit for traditional academic inquiry because it pushes the boundaries of common academic expertise. International affairs scholars are generally trained to be either issue experts – security experts, political economists, environmental experts or they need to have country- or regional expertise. Methodologically, BRICS countries are not a natural comparison, and their study in public policy schools depends on the perception of their relevance. The most immediate field for investigating the BRICS’ pursuit of multipolarity is the subfield of global governance, which lies at the nexus between international relations and international law. This is a rather small field in the context of all U.S. political and legal teaching and research. Despite these structural barriers, there has been a gradual evolution of what can be called “BRICS studies” or BRICS-focused scholarship in the US.

The earliest work on the BRICs was a Special Issue on the BRICs Countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) in *Asian Perspective* journal in 2007, which launched the BRICS academic debate in the US. Its editor, Leslie Armijo, wrote an article on the BRICs countries as an analytical category, raising questions about BRIC as a concept from three perspectives: neoclassical economics, realism and liberal institutionalism.⁵¹ This article reflected on the divergence of the BRIC’s interests as well as its treatment as a category – both of these aspects of the grouping have been discussed ever since. First BRIC and then BRICS studies has been a growing field of inquiry in the US. U.S. research, understood as research produced by scholars at U.S. institutions (authors or co-authors), has developed in two broad trajectories: studying individual members within the BRICS vs. BRICS as an entity and examining BRICS in the context of the liberal world order and global public goods.

Studying Individual Members within the BRICS vs. BRICS as an Entity

The BRICS is approached from various entry points. Many projects as well as conference panels on the BRIC(S) discuss individual countries under the BRIC(S) heading. A lot of studies examine why individual countries want to be a part of the BRIC(S). For example, Armijo argued that Brazil is the soft-power BRIC positioned to become an environmental power within the grouping.⁵² For Russia, as Roberts argued, BRICS “has proved to be a shrewd, cost-free display of soft power and nimble positioning between established and emerging economies, perhaps one of Moscow’s smartest foreign policy initiatives in recent years. BRICS diplomacy showcases Russia acting as a team player in an innovative network, making reasonable demands to reform international institutions while engaging in peer learning.”⁵³ BRIC also plays an important role for China, as Glosny argues, because it minimizes China’s dependence on the US and possibly constrains U.S. unilateralism, and China can use it for “stabilizing its international environment, helping other developing countries, strengthening its identity as a developing country, coordinating its position with other BRICS to maximize leverage, and hiding in a group to avoid negative attention.”⁵⁴ U.S. scholars also often contribute their country-specific expertise to projects examining a BRICS-relevant topic. For example, Yasheng Huang, a well-known China expert at MIT, contributed to the study of Governance Capacities in the BRICS, which examined sustainable governance indicators for each of the BRICS countries and compared the results.⁵⁵

Once scholars address the BRICS as an entity rather than a descriptive term for the countries that rise together, the question is what this entity represents. My article with Christian Bruetsch asks if the BRICS is “a bargaining coalition, an imagined community or a geopolitical fad” and examines the grouping’s associational dynamics when the countries act together in the fields of finance and climate change.⁵⁶ Fourcade examines the relationship between the material reality of the concept of BRICS and its symbolic place in the world economy and argues that it is “better apprehended through its symbolic and political dimensions, as an effort by well-placed actors in the financial markets to drum up excitement about investment opportunities, as well as reorient the governance structures of the world economy away from the traditional stronghold of Europe.”⁵⁷ When the BRICS is indeed treated as an entity, what does its existence represent? Mittleman finds BRICS as a reflection of a larger explosion of organizational pluralism, which signals a repositioning within global governance and adjustments among its formal and informal modes.⁵⁸

BRICS, the Liberal World Order and Global Public Goods

The emergence of the BRIC and then the BRICS revived the old debate about the future of the liberal world order, which has previously revolved around the rise of China in particular.⁵⁹ A special issue of the *Polity* journal in 2010 was titled “Challengers or Stakeholders? BRICS and The Liberal World Order” and discussed the BRICS’ varying levels of integration into the “Western order,” which generally refers to the promotion of democratization, free markets, multilateral cooperation and humanitarian intervention. The BRICS countries’ divergence from the West is most often discussed in the context of their attitudes toward the Washington Consensus, a dominant Western development paradigm. Two U.S. scholars edited a special issue of the *Review of International Political Economy* dedicated to this topic and discussed how the BRICS adopted parts of the Washington Consensus while also defending state-led development policies.⁶⁰ Similarly, BRICS countries’ attitudes toward the use of force to prevent human rights abuse have been discussed during their responses to the situations in Libya and Syria in the UN Security Council, and individual human rights records of the BRICS countries are gaining renewed attention. For example, the University of California Los Angeles School of Law organized a two-day symposium in 2013 titled “Building BRICS: Human Rights in Today’s Emerging Economic Power.”

While U.S. scholars question what values will be promoted and how, the very notion of the liberal world order has been challenged. Some argue that the liberal order itself is “mythical” because global governance is now neither liberal nor orderly, and there are “stunningly few instances of international

cooperation on significant issues.”⁶¹ Others argue that China and the BRICS have been free riders, taking advantage of the U.S. – led Bretton Woods system, financial globalization, the communications and transportation revolutions, and the new international division of labor to grow faster and game the system.⁶² Lieber says that the BRICS are making the new order more multipolar without making it more multilateral because they are demonstrating the lack of engagement in sustaining international institutions in the fields of climate change, human rights, nuclear proliferation or trade.⁶³ Kahler argues that rising powers are moderate reformers in global economic negotiations and international security regimes, but that it is necessary to promote greater transparency, institutional flexibility and construction of informal transnational networks to ensure that global governance does not weaken.⁶⁴ The challenge for the BRICS is to develop various aspects of coalitional leadership – framing problems and promoting policy solutions jointly, using coalitional weight to mobilize others and politically engineer consensus.⁶⁵ The rise of powers leads to broader questions about their impact on democracy, legitimacy, and social justice as well as the sustainability of the emerging new forms of governance.⁶⁶ At the same time, there is increasing interest in the various forms of BRICS’ power. For example, the University of Southern California’s PDiN Monitor dedicated a special issue to “The BRICS Countries and Public Diplomacy” to examine BRICS’ soft power, and others have studied the BRICs as academic superpowers.⁶⁷

U.S. scholars have been describing, analyzing and explaining the rise of the BRICS and reflecting on the world order as they rise. BRICS-specific research treating the BRICS as an entity is still in its infancy because there is not much data on the BRICS’ joint behavior, and the interactions among the BRICS are not transparent. Yet there is increasing interest in the topic both in terms of empirically examining individual countries under the BRICS heading and organizing conferences and edited volumes dedicated to the BRICS. Although individual scholars are showing great interest in the BRICS, the academia is not embracing it yet from an institutional perspective. An exception is the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs’ institutional initiative the BRICLab. It is a special forum for BRIC studies, which examines the BRIC’s influence on global affairs through classes, executive programs and conferences. Interestingly, despite the fact that its inaugural conference was in 2011, it uses BRIC rather than BRICS terminology, suggesting that the study of the BRICS as a political entity is not a priority. The analysis suggests that there are two promising developments regarding U.S. responses to the BRICS from an academic perspective. First, there is an increasingly diverse group of scholars engaged in the “after hegemony” debate, which is becoming less obsessed with *who* is rising/declining and more focused on *what* kind of contributions they can or need to make to the processes of global governance. The new development bank is a case in point: US decline vs. China’s rise is less relevant than the ability of new powers to bring new ideas to the table and deliver global public goods. The fact that the BRICS studies attract comparative politics and international negotiation scholars reinforces this point, because this scholarship tends to be more country-detached and issue-focused. Second, the evolution of the BRICS studies in the US happens parallel to the rapid development of the BRICS studies in the BRICS countries. This means U.S. scholarship will become more internationalized as scholars will need to engage more directly with ideas produced abroad to meaningfully contribute to the field.

5. The BRICS from a U.S. Perspective

The BRICS becomes important for the U.S. policy agenda if it brings something new to the table, either in terms of costs, benefits or ideas. Currently the BRICS itself is neither clear nor consistent about its joint goals and has demonstrated that building consensus among the countries is more difficult than expected. This, however, does not diminish the relevance of the BRICS for U.S. foreign policymaking. When we compare where the BRICS is in 2013 to where the BRIC was in 2008, the evolution of cooperation has been rapid, and the grouping is on a clear capacity building and institution building trajectory.⁶⁸ Similarly, the BRICS has grown more eager to use the grouping to exercise “go-it-alone-power” or serve as an outside option to negotiate the desired changes in global governance. Given this

dynamics, marginalizing the BRICS limits U.S. opportunities to mitigate and adapt to potential challenges associated with its rise. By focusing on the U.S. response to the BRICS, this article provides an overview of the state of the BRICS debate in the US and discusses the engagement of the key constituencies – officials, think tanks and academics. It finds that the BRICS’ rapid mobilization to change global governance has left U.S. foreign policy circles rather uninspired. BRICS is represented as a non-entity and non-issue in official foreign policymaking and some of the top analysts suggest that focusing on the BRICS is misleading. BRICS’ leadership to change the system requires followers, but the grouping’s pursuit is not acknowledged - BRICS countries are not U.S. - selected poles or partners at the center of debates on reforming the global order. Nonetheless, the presence of the BRICS in the U.S. policy debate has increased over the past two years and BRICS-related scholarship has proliferated.

The conducted analysis suggests that the rise of the BRICS presents an opportunity for U.S. foreign policy development in three ways. First, it challenges foreign policy officials to develop a coherent U.S. response to multipolarity. Over the past few years there have been numerous inconsistent messages about U.S. political and economic leadership and there is a tension between Obama administration’s effort to do “nation building at home” and keep the US as an “indispensable nation” in the world. The rise of the BRICS makes officials confront these inconsistencies because they are under pressure to develop a response to BRICS’ multipolar pursuits and find it harder and harder to deflect BRICS-focused questions in their daily work. Second, the rise of the BRICS reframes the policy debate from bilateral China vs. US competition to multilateral processes of institutional reform. Who is rising and who is not becomes secondary to discussing the merits of global decision-making and contrasting U.S. vs. BRICS’ views of global public goods that need to be delivered. The BRICS’ claim for a more democratic order can be challenging for the US in this context. As the world’s democracy promoter, the US needs to confront BRICS’ claims of its dominance because BRICS countries indeed represent 40% of population. At the same time, in order to preserve dominance, it would need to turn to informal governance, which is inherently less democratic than formal governance. Finally, the rise of the BRICS generates a subfield of BRICS studies, which internationalizes the production and consumption of knowledge in the field of global politics. This article provokes rather than concludes the debate on U.S. (counter)mobilization in the context of the BRICS in hope that further research on the challenges and opportunities of the BRICS’ rise in the US will follow.

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