

Brazil and the BRICS Agenda: Risks and limitations from the viewpoint of the constitutional principles and relevant national policies

O Brasil e a Agenda do BRICS: Riscos e limitações do ponto de vista dos princípios constitucionais e de políticas nacionais relevantes

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Abstract: The BRICS countries □ Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa □ assemble 42% of the world population, contribute with 18% of the global GDP and 17% of the global research and development investments. Thus, it is easy to grasp the benefits that such an association of countries can bring to its individual members. However, Brazil should also strategically consider the threats involved and the risks that may arise from a partnership with countries like China and Russia, which are heavy players in international politics. Indeed, the BRICS association can be damaging to the prestige of the Brazil if it is not shaped in a way to prevent the unwelcome effects of other members geopolitical ambitions. This article sheds light on aspects of the BRICS that are detrimental to Brazil's strategic interests and examines the risks involved, in order to conclude on limitations the country should consider for the group's agenda.

Keywords: BRICS, agenda, threats and risks.

Resumo: Os países do BRICS □ Brasil, Rússia, Índia, China e África do Sul □ reúnem 42% da população mundial, contribuem com 18% do PIB global e 17% dos investimentos globais em pesquisa e desenvolvimento. Assim, é fácil compreender os benefícios que essa associação de países pode trazer para cada um de seus membros. No entanto, o Brasil também deve considerar estrategicamente as ameaças envolvidas e os riscos que podem surgir de uma parceria com países como China e Rússia, que são atores importantes na política internacional. De fato, a associação BRICS pode prejudicar o prestígio do Brasil se não for moldada de forma a evitar os efeitos indesejados das ambições geopolíticas de outros membros. Este artigo lança luz sobre aspectos do BRICS que são prejudiciais aos interesses estratégicos do Brasil e examina os riscos envolvidos, a fim de concluir sobre as limitações que o país deve considerar para a agenda do grupo.

Palavras-chave: BRICS, agenda, ameaças e riscos.

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Introduction

Belonging to a group of relevant States like China, Russia and India is a significant development for any country and Brazil is not an exception. The BRICS association opens opportunities in many areas and adds to the country's economic and political influence part of the weight the other members represent, reason why the group has been a priority in Brazil's foreign policy. However, considering the remarkable differences among the BRICS members in terms of regional contexts, economic capacities, political interests and global strategies, some aspects should be considered by Brazil to properly place itself in the group. It must be recognized, for instance, that China is a powerful member that has the capacity to influence the way the group works through initiatives to shape its agenda. In the same line, Russia, an important political player, may also want to give to the BRICS a dimension better tailored to its interests. According to many international observers, China and Russia have been willing to use the full expression of their power to shape the international context in a way conducive to their regional and global goals. On this specific point, Alisson alerts that

today, foreign policy elites have woken up to the meteoric rise of an authoritarian

China, which now rivals or even surpasses the United States in many domains, and the resurgence of an assertive, illiberal Russian nuclear superpower, which is willing to use its military to change both borders in Europe and the balance of power in the Middle East (Alisson 2018, p. 4).

In this context, the objective of the present article is to evaluate the threats and risks facing Brazil as a BRICS member and to consider the limitations that, in view of such risks, should be considered for the formulation of the group's agenda. Considering that the economic and multi-sectoral cooperation has been the backbone of the BRICS since its inception and constitutes fields in which negative implications are more predictable and consensually something to be prevented, the focus of this work will be placed on the political and scientific and technological fields. Yet, as a matter of methodology, the analysis will be developed with the constitutional principles and relevant national policies as backdrop, since these legal references constitute an official guidance for Brazil's participation in international arrangements and to take position in multilateral forums.

In order to ensure the quality and reliability of the data, the main sources utilized in the research were the

Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, governmental official policies and interviews with Brazilian authorities and public servants, as well as BRICS' official declarations and documents.

Principles and legal references for Brazil's international relations

According to the Constitution of the Republic, Brazil shall be governed in its international relations by the prevalence of human rights, respect for peoples' self-determination, non-intervention, defense of peace and peaceful settlement of conflicts, among other relevant principles. In addition to that, the Constitution establishes that Brazil will seek the economic, political, social and cultural integration of the peoples of Latin America, aiming at the formation of a Latin American community of nations.

In line with such principles and guidance, the National Defense Policy (Brasil, 2012) establishes the following objectives related to the international arena: to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security, to contribute to regional stability and to develop the national defense industry in order to obtain autonomy in indispensable technologies. Accordingly, the National Defense Strategy (Brasil, 2012) stimulates the integration of South America and seeks

to capacitate the Brazilian defense industry in order to progressively eliminate the dependence on imported services and goods.

The constitutional guidance on Latin America integration is based on the recognition of the common cultural origin of the Latin American countries and indicates the understanding that Brazil's future will ever be conditioned by its regional circumstances. In this sense, and adopting a more restrict geographic focus, it stands clear that Brazil has primarily a South American vocation. The 17.000 km of land borders with nine countries of the sub-region, for instance, closely connect Brazil to its neighbors and materialize the regional interdependence in economic, development and security issues.

On the field of S&T, the new Legal Framework for Science, Technology and Innovation emphasizes the strategic character of scientific and technological activities for the country's economic and social development (Brasil, Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia, Inovação e Comunicações, 2018). In turn, the Law 13.243, of 11 January 2016, refers to measures destined to encourage innovation and scientific and technological researches within the productive environment, with a view to

technological capacitation and the achievement of technological autonomy. Among its principles, the mentioned bill highlights the need to promote business competitiveness in international markets and recommends actions to foster international cooperation for innovation and technology transfer (Brasil, 2016).

Under the umbrella of these principles and legal references Brazil participates in the BRICS, whose three pillars of action have been the political coordination, the financial-economic cooperation and the multi-sectorial cooperation. Regarding the political coordination, the group acts for fairer and more effective international governances in the political and economic fields. While the actions for the economic governance are mainly focused on the G-20 and include contributions to the International Monetary Fund reform, in what regards political governance the BRICS have been advocating the reform of the United Nations and promoting dialogue on the main topics of the international agenda. The multi-sectorial cooperation have been conducted in areas like health; energy; agriculture; science, technology and innovation; outer space; intellectual property rights and other (Brasil. Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2018).

All in all, the BRICS constitutes a forum for discussion and coordination of common positions and a partnership in programs and projects of mutual interest. Despite the capacity it has been showing to manage an elevated number of activities and projects, the group functions like a non-institutional mechanism that organizes meetings and sectorial activities without a secretariat (Santos Neto, 2018). Such an informal arrangement has been convenient to Brazil, due to the discrepancy in terms of power among the BRICS members and the fact that they do not broadly share the same political views. However, in face of the interests involved, there has been a continuous trend for the BRICS to adopt a more institutionalized footprint and to expand its activities. Such trend can be inferred from the BRICS annual joint statements and declarations, which have been widening the scope of the group year by year, and from the recent China's proposal of a "BRICS plus" cooperation (Brics summit expected to pave way for deeper cooperation among members, analysts say, 2017; BRICS, 2017b)².

² The joint statement of the BRICS First Summit (BRICS, 2009) prioritized economic and financial matters, like reform of international financial institutions and the international monetary system. Thereafter, the summits' statements and declarations added to the discussions issues with political connotation, including sensitive and polemic topics, like terrorism (BRICS, 2010); security crisis in Middle East (BRICS, 2011); Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria civil-war, Iran

The fact is that perceptions of the BRICS by its individual members vary. Some of them, like Brazil, see the group primarily as a support to exert more influence globally. For members like China and Russia, the group contributes to “soften” the perceptions they accumulate as hard players in the international arena. Yet, for China in particular, the BRICS is important to forge strategic ties with partners in each region of the world (Stuenkel, 2018).

Therefore, in any context, the involvement in the BRICS brings to Brazil opportunities but also imply serious risks. The latter should receive from the Brazilian authorities a special attention

Threats and risks

When the BRIC term was first used in 2001 by Jim O’Neill, Chief Economist for Goldman Sachs, it was to mean a group of countries likely to surpass the traditional economic powerhouses of the global economy by 2040 (Taylor, 2016). Although some circumstances have altered the prognosis, the economic potential of the referred countries,

enlarged in 2010 by the inclusion of South Africa, remains clear. Hence, as a result of their economic prominence, the BRICS became an efficient arrangement for financial-economic coordination and multi-sectoral cooperation. However, in what regards global and regional politics, as well as scientific and technological issues, the BRICS’ context is more complex and the window for cooperation is narrower. Following, the political and scientific – technological fronts will be analyzed.

The “political front”: geopolitics and international peace and security

BRICS members like Russia, China and, in a lesser extent, India have bold geopolitical interests and deal with tensions between such interests and their acceptance in regional and global contexts. In addition, China and India share the same area of influence, what have been generating conflicts between them along their common border, on the South China Sea and even in Africa, where the both disputes commodities markets (Ramalho, 2012). Although tensions between BRICS members may stand out as mere group’s idiosyncrasies, there are real risks for Brazil’s image when they get involved in extra-BRICS security problems.

As noted by Fonseca Júnior (2012), the BRICS members as a whole or some of

nuclear issue, security situation in Afghanistan (BRICS, 2012); Israel and Palestine peace process (BRICS, 2013); transnational organized crime and piracy (BRICS, 2014); human rights, migration (BRICS, 2015b); social security (BRICS, 2016); tensions in the Korean Peninsula (BRICS, 2017b); chemical and biological terrorism and crisis in Yemen (BRICS, 2018)

them in particular have some kind of leverage in all issues of the international agenda. Although in some of those questions the members' positions are convergent, this is not the case in many issues, which implies that the group, as such, is not able to significantly contribute to shape the international order and faces limitations to act as a global political actor. Yet, for similar reasons, the BRICS have been lacking capacity to develop a genuine and broadly recognized collective identity (Smith, 2015). In this context, discussions on international politics and peace and security issues become particularly sensitive in the BRICS due to the active roles and bold geopolitical interests of Russia and China, both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. As a result, Brazil has never proposed the inclusion of defense topics in the BRICS agenda, which are rather discussed in a bilateral basis and as convenient (Candeas, 2018; Minelli, 2018).

The greatest weakness of the BRICS lies in the disparity of power among its members and the different levels of willingness and ability to play the heavy game of international politics. The presence of China and Russia as assertive players, combined with divergent political views within the BRICS, generated a tacit "rule" of not

discussing issues that directly involve one of the members, which on the other hand makes the treatment of relevant international issues in the group seriously difunctional. The procedure of skipping relevant but sensitive issues was applied, for instance, when Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, triggering incisive condemnations by world leaders and in the UN General Assembly. In the occasion, Brazil refrained from condemning Russia, as did other BRICS members (Stuenkel, 2017). In the Fortaleza Summit, just a few months after the annexation, the BRICS countries confined themselves to express concern with the situation and call for dialogue for a peaceful solution (BRICS, 2014). The avoidance of thorny issues has also been applied in the case of artificial islands being built by China in the South China sea. The construction and militarization of such islands has never been a topic in the BRICS agenda, despite of the fact that it constitutes an important global issue and a clear violation of the international maritime law. Although the procedure of not discussing themes that would embarrass a member may contribute to the cohesiveness of the group, on the other hand it conveys to external observers the image of an idiosyncratic group of relevant nations ignoring critical international issues in their interactions.

Deepening the discussion, Ramalho (2012) points out that, although there is convergence in the BRICS on the need to strengthen international institutions and even in some polemic issues, such common views are based on circumstantial interests and, as a result, the group did not develop consensus around values that could underpin the restructuring of the international order. Related to this point is the kind of “disconnection from reality” that may be perceived in some BRICS declarations, caused by statements of principles and conceptual views that seems to be mere figures of rhetoric for some group’s members. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the recent China actions in the South China sea, to resort to the already mentioned but very telling examples, are not in line with the condemnation of unilateral military interventions, the respect of international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes expressed in several BRICS summits declarations. The fact is that the respect of international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes have not been of paramount importance to Russia and China, as military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria by Russia and border countries by China indicate (Zhen, 2017; Fraihat, Issaev, 2018).

Reiteration of the principles enshrined in the UN Charter in BRICS declarations, without criticism or at least discussion when a member of the group violates such principles is, to say the least, a wishful thinking. Taking it further, such a procedure may render the group politically irrelevant or signalize that BRICS members which are not intervening by force in the international arena only keep this attitude for lack of opportunity.

There are also risks related to regional questions. Since the BRICS’ Third Summit (Sanya, 2011), which marked the admission of South Africa, regional issues have been introduced in the agenda, in a step that clearly indicates the BRICS’ interest in reaching out to countries especially in the Global South. Accordingly, the Sanya Declaration highlighted the group’s consensus on promoting coordination on international and regional issues of common interest (BRICS, 2011).

A reason for the inclusion of regional issues in the agenda could be the BRICS countries’ interest in supporting the stabilization and development of their regions, but the fact that some members do very little in benefit of their own neighborhoods contradicts this rationale (Ramalho, 2012). Definitely, interests of countries like China, India and

Russia to improve, via the BRICS, their access to markets in Africa and Latin America should not be ignored (Zafar, 2007; Mawdsley, Emma; MacCann, 2011; Fellet, 2014), as should not be disregarded China's pragmatic view that trade agreements and investments in foreign countries mean not only business, but also a projection of power strategy ("O Brasil permanece sem uma estratégia para a China, seu maior parceiro", 2019).

As a matter of fact, a number of initiatives conceived within the BRICS framework have been directed to countries in Africa, while South American and Eurasian countries are envisaged as potential beneficiaries. For instance, the Fifth Summit (Durban) took place under the theme "BRICS and Africa: partnership for development, integration and industrialization" and included a meeting of the BRICS heads of State with leaders of African countries (BRICS, 2013). In the same line, the summits of Fortaleza (2014), Ufa (2015), Goa (2016) and Xiamen (2017) included meetings with leaders of South American, Eurasian and again African countries to explore possibilities of the BRICS New Development Bank, expansion of trade and commercial ties.

For Brazil, there are risks both if the BRICS go on addressing regional issues

and if it does not. If the BRICS members discuss regional issues, this may be detrimental to Brazil's interest of having no extra-regional power interfering in South America. On the other hand, if regional issues are ignored in the BRICS, Brazil may be perceived by its neighbors as reviewing its traditional diplomatic priority and detaching itself from its region (Barbosa, 2012). This is why some authors and scholars, Ricupero (2012) among them, understand that the BRICS partnership should be considered of limited utility to Brazil and should never compete with the aim of seeking the regional integration.

Another risk comes from China's and Russia's attempts to expand their geopolitical influence to South America through military presence. China, for instance, has inaugurated in late 2017 a satellite and space control station in the province of Neuquén, in the south of Argentina. Although the agreement between both governments establishes that the installation has no military purposes, it is hard to admit that space programs can be completely disconnected from military objectives (Lodoño, 2018). By its side, Russia has been conducting military exercises with the Armed Forces of Venezuela, like the one that took place in December 2018, when Russian strategic bombers were

deployed in the South American country. In the same occasion, Russian media outlets reported that the Kremlin was negotiating with Venezuela the establishment of a forward outpost on the island of La Orchila in order to base nuclear-capable Tu-160 Blackjack bombers over there (Trevithick, 2018).

Still regarding Venezuela, the developments of 23rd January 2019, when the National Assembly's President, Juan Guaidó, proclaimed himself acting president of the country, is potentially challenging in the BRICS. Aligned with the United States of America (USA) and several other countries, Brazil immediately supported Guaidó in detriment of Nicolás Maduro, whose claims to the presidency are based on elections took as fraudulent. However, both Russia and China extended support to Maduro (Jingtao, 2019; Tsvetkova, Zverev, 2019) and, in doing so, became Brazil's adversaries in a matter of its direct interest.

It is important to mention that keeping South America and the South Atlantic as zones of peace and security is an important objective of Brazil's Defense Policy. For this reason, defense authorities consider the presence of military foreign assets and bases in the region as highly detrimental to Brazil's relevant interests (Minelli, 2018).

The "scientific-technological front": complexities in transferring cutting-edge technologies

The Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on Science, Technology and Innovation adopted by the BRICS establishes, as one of its main objectives, the co-generation of new knowledge and innovative products, services and processes utilizing appropriate funding and investment instruments. Among the possible areas of cooperation, the document mentions "technology transfer" (BRICS, 2015a), though it does not specify the forms of transfer. More specific, the BRICS Action Plan for Innovation Cooperation (2017-2020) expresses the member countries' commitment to encouraging technology transfer within the BRICS, strengthening training of technology transfer professionals and developing platforms for collaboration among businesses and the academia. The plan also refers to joint projects among partners in each BRICS country for "technological collaboration" (BRICS, 2017a).

Moving forward to create opportunities aiming at technology transfer within the group, the members also agreed with the creation of the BRICS Technology Transfer Center in Kunming (China), which is expected to have associated

centers in each member country. Such installations will set focus on the training of personnel from companies or associations of companies to perform in the field of technology transfer and to promote innovation cooperation. Therefore, the centers will not be agencies destined to the transfer of technology per se, but installations to facilitate the process between interested national companies (Matsumoto, 2018).

However, the technological distance between China, Russia and, in some fields, India, from one side; and Brazil and South Africa, from the other, constitutes an ambiguous substratum when it comes to cooperation in S&T (Fonseca Júnior, 2012). The fact is that, the good intentions and initiatives notwithstanding, technology transfer within the BRICS will remain difficult to achieve, since countries and national companies in possession of cutting-edge technologies will not share this valuable information and capabilities without adequate compensation and assurances that the knowledge will be protected. On the other hand, the receiving parties must have guarantee that the process will be effective, which is not easy to ensure.

The reality tends to be even grimmer when it comes to the field of defense products. The strategy of countries that

master technologies to build or manufacture defense items is to retain them as long as possible, while they look for markets to sell their products. Russia, for instance, intensively seeks to sell the defense products of its industries, showing no interest in transferring the related technologies. China, being still an importer of defense items like fighter jets, helicopters and precision guided munitions (Blasko, 2005; Elmer, Zhen, 2018), keeps avid in obtaining technologies and reticent in transferring them (Cai, Elmer, 2019; Kinling, 2019). For such reasons, Brazil's Ministry of Defense understands that discussions on defense products and technologies should take place in bilateral basis and not in a multilateral forum like the BRICS (Campos, 2018).

Conclusion

A strategic diplomacy should focus on the pursuit of a "strategic vision" for a country or international organization with the aim of providing principles and guidelines to shape its positioning in the global arena or in relation to key partners in particular (Smith, 2015). Under such a perspective, and considering that the BRICS partnership is strategic to Brazil, the participation in the group should be pragmatic, strictly

aimed at the country's interests and associated with a vision of future. Such an approach is necessary because, in the ever-changing world we live in, States must deal both with power and principles and, in many situations, this imply to act in complex environments and under considerable tensions. For such cases, the amply recommended formula is that the States safeguard their national interests, applying the power they have in accordance with international rules and in view of the broadest multilateral basis possible.

As argued along this article, Brazil's main challenges in the BRICS are to deal with the disparity of power in the group and the global ambitions of Russia and China, as well as to strike an appropriate balance between its participation in the arrangement and its regional role. Accordingly, Brazil's problems will become even greater if the BRICS move to become a formal political actor. Therefore, if faced with proposals to elevate the group's political status, Brazil should consider the importance of being a widely respected nation based on the principles enshrined in its Constitution and the negative consequences that such a transformation would generate. As expressed by Ricupero (2012), it is not appropriate to consider the BRICS as a platform in which Brazil may achieve common

positions concerning values, since the country does not share the same values with China, Russia and perhaps even India.

For Brazil, it is important to keep good relations in its region, with the USA, the European countries and other relevant States, the BRICS members included. In order to succeed in building productive interactions with such a varied group of actors, Brazil should stand firm on its values and constitutional principles, which must constitute the mainstay of its international relations and diplomacy. If principles and values are relaxed or adapted to the benefit of a given situation or to meet momentary conveniences, the country will accumulate discredit, which can easily surpass the advantages offered by privileged relationships.

Therefore, Brazil's actions should aim at maintaining the BRICS as an arrangement primarily dedicated to financial-economic and multi-sectoral issues. In addition, Brazil should participate in the group also attentive to its regional interests. This will require interactions with South American countries in order to articulate with them, whenever possible, the positions to be presented in the BRICS forum. In spite of what may be an exhaustive effort of political-diplomatic

concertation, by doing so Brazil will be able to preserve a legitimate leadership role in its region.

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