Rising Powers and International Security: the BRICS and the Syrian Conflict

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Abstract

Some rising powers, including the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), have openly contested certain international security norms, for instance challenging the tendency to invoke humanitarian protection to carry out military intervention. However, the relevance of rising powers, and especially coalitions of such states, to specific conflicts remains poorly understood. How pertinent is the BRICS as a collective actor in international security, and what are their stances on major armed conflicts? This article focuses on the Syrian conflict, examining the BRICS coalition's positions on the war since 2012. The analysis indicates that, despite some early convergence on the respect of national sovereignty—a position that was deeply shaped by the outcome of the intervention in Libya—the BRICS have begun reframing the Syrian civil war as an issue of terrorism with potential spillover effects. This reframing suggests that Russia, backed by China and India, has increasingly led the BRICS discourse on Syria. Ultimately, however, it is Russia—rather than the BRICS as a collective unit—that has become a direct player in Syria (through both military intervention and political efforts), thus making itself into an indispensable party in the resolution of the conflict. At the same time, the Syrian government considers the BRICS coalition to be a legitimate player, which opens up space for the coalition to play a role in future peacebuilding efforts, whether through political support for a peace process, development cooperation in the Middle Eastern states that have been receiving the bulk of refugees, or post-conflict reconstruction in Syria itself.

Keywords

Syria, BRICS, conflict, rising powers, Middle East, UN

Introduction

Some rising powers, including the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), have openly contested certain international security norms, for instance challenging the tendency to invoke humanitarian protection to carry out

military intervention. However, the relevance of rising powers, and especially coalitions of such states, to specific conflicts remains poorly understood. If the goals of such groupings include those of amplifying the voices of their member states and creating a platform that is in fact more than the sum of its parts, then the role of rising power coalitions as collective agents must be analyzed with respect to issues of peace and security. In the case of the BRICS, how does the coalition position itself before major armed conflicts? This article focuses on the Syrian conflict, examining the BRICS coalition's positions as inferred from official documents such as the annual summit declarations.

In its official discourse on global governance, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) coalition has questioned certain established norms and institutions as they push for the transformation of the international system into a more multilateral configuration, one that would better reflect the current distribution of power. In issues of international security, this contestatory reformist stance has sometimes provoked unease among other actors within the international community. In particular, the role of the BRICS—namely, whether they enhance peace, detract from it, or remain "conveniently aloof" from key issues—has become so controversial that Western think tanks have resorted to terms like "sovereignty hawks," "spoilers," and "free riders" in trying to capture the coalition's relevance (see, for instance, Patrick 2010; Van Ham 2015). At the same time, the BRICS' contestation generated new expectations on the part of the international community regarding rising powers' ability to bring to the table innovative approaches for dealing with international security challenges.

The alarm (and conversely, for BRICS-optimists, the sense of opportunity for contestation and innovation) reached a peak with the Libyan crisis, when the BRICS states adopted increasingly critical stances towards the use of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework to justify military intervention through the United Nations (UN). However, these countries' individual stances on international security issues, including R2P, have been driven by different sets of motivations; moreover, these positions are not immutable. This variation, in turn, indicates a need to better understand the BRICS' relevance to specific armed conflicts since Libya, both from a normative standpoint and in terms of their concrete engagement (or lack thereof) as a collective unit.

This article examines the pertinence of the BRICS coalition within the field of international security by focusing on its stances toward the Syrian conflict. More specifically, what positions has the BRICS adopted with respect to the Syrian civil war, and what explains their perspectives? The analysis draws on official documents (especially the annual declarations issued at the head of state summits) and media materials to analyze the changing perspective of the BRICS, within the broader context of sweeping geopolitical changes in the Middle East. The

analysis also touches on the Assad regime's official discourse towards the BRICS, as gleaned from official statements and documents.

The research suggests that, early in the Syrian crisis, the individual BRICS states largely converged on their criticism of the Libyan crisis and adopted a similar stance towards Syria, stressing the principle of respect for national sovereignty and the need for a political solution to the escalating violence. However, as a coalition the BRICS remained very much on the sidelines; in fact, the only concrete attempt by some of these rising powers to mediate the Syrian war was undertaken by another coalition, the IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa Dialogue Forum), which is a separate platform altogether rather than a mere subset of the BRICS coalition. Since then, Russia has influenced the BRICS' official discourse so as to frame the Syrian crisis as an issue of terrorism, with potential spillover effects within and beyond Syria's immediate vicinity.

In 2015, Russia's direct entry into the conflict, in open support of the Assad regime, marked a turning point not only for the Middle East and geopolitics more broadly, but also for the BRICS as a collective actor, because Russia's deepening engagement in the conflict generates new tensions for the coalition's discourse of sovereignty. At the same time, there are identifiable demands by the Assad regime for an expanded political role by the BRICS; the regime treats the BRICS as a legitimate actor and has directly appealed to the coalition for help. Ultimately, while it is Russia—rather than the BRICS as a collective unit—that has made itself a direct player and thus one of the indispensable parties in the resolution of the conflict, the BRICS as a collective body may be influential in shaping the international community's attitudes towards interventions in Syria. While the BRICS coalition is a loose platform rather than a highly institutionalized organization—and one that "lacks teeth" from a military standpoint—it stands to play a role in future peace-building efforts in Syria, especially post-conflict reconstruction.

Rising Powers and Intervention Norms: From Libya to Syria

In the 2000s, as new nodes of economic growth and political influence began to emerge in the international system, certain "rising powers"—broadly put, regional powers that aspire to global status and advocate on behalf of a more representative global governance system—assumed a sharply contestatory tone with respect to some of the established norms and institutions of global governance. Among other points, these countries pushed for speedier reform of key organizations, such as the Bretton Woods institutions, as part of their ambition to accelerate the transition towards a more multipolar world order (Acharya 2014; Hurrell 2006). These rising powers voiced these demands not only individually, but also through new trans-regional loose coalitions like the BRIC, launched in 2009 and initially known as the BRIC (South Africa joined in 2011). The coalition was meant not

only to enhance intra-group cooperation, but also to project their collective influence globally, especially in areas in which the member states could find a least common denominator and coordinate policy positions.

Although the BRICS countries have so far found greater affinity and possibility for cooperation in the economic and development spheres, especially in the years following the 2008 financial crisis (to which these countries responded relatively robustly), the coalition has also attempted to reach some common positions on international security issues. Here the path has not been entirely smooth. One major obstacle to broader coordination in this area is a structural cleavage among the members in terms of their positions at the UN: while Russia and China are permanent seat holders at the Security Council (UNSC), the other three countries have long aspired to such a position as part of broader demands for UN reform. However, all five states share the desire to play a greater role in international security, whether by showing concrete commitments, such as troop and police contributions to UN peacekeeping, by engaging more directly in conflict mediation and normative debates about international security (De Carvalho & de Coning 2013) —or, in some instances, through non-UN engagement with armed conflicts.

At a normative level, the BRICS countries seemed increasingly to find some common ground in their defense of the principle of national sovereignty and in their distaste for the concepts like "contingent sovereignty," which challenges the norm of non-intervention (Bellamy 2011). Starting in the mid-2000s, the BRICS countries' resistance to attempts to temper the concept of sovereignty in international laws and norms became highly relevant to global debates about humanitarian intervention and the use of force. Although their stances on sovereignty are driven by different sets of motivations and are thus not entirely equivalent (Laïdi 2012), the BRICS countries have all been generally critical of what they perceive as a tendency on the part of the US and Western Europe to carry out military interventions in a self-interested quest to implement regime change, with uncertain results at best. Since the mid-2000s, when the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was adopted at the UN World Summit and subsequently formalized through Resolution 1674 as the normative framework for the UNSC to decide upon the use of force under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter ('UNSC S/RES/1674' 2006), the BRICS countries have repeatedly either balked at or plainly opposed proposals for military intervention. For instance, the four initial BRIC members countries abstained from Resolution 1973 ('UNSC S/RES/1973' 2011), which laid down the legal basis for intervention in Libya, including the imposition of a no-fly zone (South Africa voted in favor but later became more critical of the intervention). Although no country opposed the resolution, the pattern of abstention indicated a level of unease with the move to intervene militarily—a stance

that was reinforced as successful stabilization of Libya turned out to be a harder task than the resolution proponents had originally foreseen.

On the Syrian case, the BRICS states' converging and increasingly critical stances became particularly apparent in 2011, when all five BRICS states occupied seats at the UNSC and expressed misgivings over a resolution condemning the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters on Syria. (Lynch 2011) interpreted their positions as a result of the shared belief that the Western powers had overstepped the Council's mandate in Libya.

The outcome of the Libyan intervention prompted a greater convergence among the BRICS countries on R2P, specifically making them more reluctant to endorse humanitarian intervention in Syria. For example, even Brazil tried to support UN actions meant to protect civilians, and although at first it had supported UN actions in Libya, it eventually became critical of the air campaign by the Coalition of Willing states, on the grounds that the intervening countries were taking advantage of the ambiguous term "all necessary means" included in the resolution (Laskaris & Kreutz 2015). In the words of Thakur (2013), the Libyan intervention "proved particularly controversial among the emerging powers, and the price of exceeding the mandate there has been paid by Syrians."

However, Libya did not spell the end of R2P. Although Russia has proven more recalcitrant, the other BRICS countries have been willing to engage in further debate over intervention norms, especially with a view to specifying when and under what condition R2P may apply. Brazil, for instance, proposed the Responsibility while Protecting (RwP) was a way to temper the application of R2P, although the proposal eventually lost steam (Tourinho, Stuenkel & Brockmeier 2016). Within UN debates, Russia has objected far more frequently to R2P and has not put forth proposals or suggestions to refine the concept. At the same time, Russia justified its unilateral military interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) as justified under R2P due to threats to Russian nationals. China, according to Fung (2016), has increasingly shifted from opposition to advocacy on behalf of R2P; in 2012, for instance, the Chinese government briefly floated the idea of Responsible Protection. Even though China later backed out, the proposal also suggests that, far from immutable, these countries' stances on sovereignty and intervention have been subject to subtle shifts even after the Libya controversy.

As the case of Libya shows, there is a methodological challenge in analyzing the role of a coalition like the BRICS with respect to specific conflicts (or any issue of international relations, for that matter): it is not always easy to differentiate the actions and positions of individual members from those of the grouping as a whole. While the focus of this paper is on the latter (and, as a result, the main

data sources are documents and speeches that express the five countries' collective view), in order to interpret how those positions came about it is also necessary to grasp the key engagements, motivations, and stances of particular members, particularly when they may have a strong pull in the way that the coalition positions itself and frames a particular issue.

Is there a collective response by the BRICS to the Syrian crisis?

Much like the case of Libya, the outbreak and intensification of the Syrian conflict became something of a test for the BRICS, at least from a Western perspective. First, because the BRICS began stressing that there had to be a reasonable prospect of success before they would be willing to support military intervention. Second, as Odeyemi (2016) notes, the BRICS' common opposition to military intervention early on in the Syrian case was also a reaction to draft resolutions sponsored by the US-France-UK (P3) alliance accusing the Assad regime of mass atrocities without mentioning opposition groups. In response to opposition, especially by Russia and China, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy launched the Friends of Syria, an initiative outside the UNSC and whose first meeting—held in Tunis in February 2012—included open endorsements of military interventionism. The membership of the Friends of Syria (which has since dwindled into a "core group of eleven states") did not include the BRICS countries.

Indeed, this initial resistance—led by Russia and China—would reemerge over the next following years. Despite the UN initiatives that led to the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and made incremental improvements to humanitarian assistance, these two permanent seat holders have blocked several resolutions (for instance, a May 2014 draft resolution that would have referred the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court) on the grounds that they are unbalanced in their accusations (Adams 2015; 'Recent Draft Resolution' 2015).

There were also geopolitical alignments, in particular Russia's historically close ties to the Assad regime. Allison (2015) has described Moscow's open support for the Syrian government during and after the Arab Spring as "a diplomatic shield for Damascus at the UN Security Council" even as it provided the regime with arms. More broadly, although the Middle East has been a secondary region within Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, the Kremlin's aspirations to reestablish Russia's global status have led it to reengage with the region, whose combination of natural resources and political instability make it an important site of global power politics (Trenin 2016). China's interests in the region are more closely tied to trade and energy, especially oil, but it is also interested in potential new markets, such as Iraq and Iran (Feng 2015). Chinese engagement in the Middle East has also intensified as Chinese assets and citizens have come under direct threat from recurring instability (Parello-Plesner & Duchâtel 2015).

The other members of the BRICS are, in comparison to Russia and China, less directly engaged with the Middle East, and the region carries far less strategic weight to their foreign policies than do their immediate vicinities. Nonetheless, all three countries have worked to intensify ties with Middle Eastern states in the post-Cold War period. In the 2000s, Brazil reached out to the region's countries, including Syria, during the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), which not only placed strong emphasis on South-South economic and political cooperation, but also attempted to play a mediating role in Middle Eastern conflicts, including the Palestine-Israel conflict and the mounting tensions over the Iran nuclear program (Silva & Pilla 2012). India has long pursued a combination of pragmatic economic cooperation, especially with the Gulf state and with Israel along with a "hands-off" non-interventionist approach to the region as a whole (Barakat & Pethiyagoda 2015). Finally, while South Africa's pattern of ties to the Middle East has changed considerably since the end of the Apartheid regime, its engagement has also been intermittent and driven primarily by economic considerations, political alignments (especially through the Non-Aligned Movement); while South Africa also views the region through the lens of security, its direct engagement is heavily focused on southern Africa (Bishku 2010). Lastly, it should be said that Russia and China have long sold weapons to Syria, and that Brazilian arms have also reportedly found their way into the conflict. These countries' individual engagement in the Middle East thus reflect a strong set of economic interests, along with a high degree of non-interventionism even as they express concern for recurring instability, including since the Arab Spring.

To what extent do these different degrees of engagement in the Middle East, and their respective sets of interests and motivations, shape the BRICS coalition's collective perspectives on specific conflicts? The grouping's common stances, and any changes in the BRICS positions on the Syrian conflict, can be inferred not only from their positions and arguments at the UN, where their voting patterns tend to express the individual states' preferences, but also from the annual declarations issued at the yearly head of state summits, analyzed below. The declarations reflect not only discussions at the summits themselves, but also the debates that take place during the ministerial and "sherpa" meetings held between the annual head of state meetings. The BRICS thus declarations filter, to some extent, any common positions among the four (now, five) states that were reached during ministerial meetings and annual summits[1].

Until the Sanya, China declaration (issued in April 14, 2011), the main international conflict referred to in the documents was the Libyan case ('BRICS Sanya Declaration, 2011' 2011) . Subsequent declarations still made occasional refer-

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[1] All of the BRICS declarations and action plans can be found on the following site, along with other BRICS documents: http://brics.itamaraty.gov.br/declarations-action-plans-and-communiques/listadecplan

ences to Libya[2], but the main focus of the declaration's passages dealing with armed conflicts shifted to the Syrian civil war, which began escalating rapidly and becoming more complex as a greater number of actors became involved in the fighting. As the analysis below shows, the high visibility of the Syrian conflict in BRICS documents and discussions attests not only to the intensification of the fighting, but also to the weight accorded by the coalition to the geopolitical and normative aspects of the war.

a) New Delhi: Syria Enters the BRICS Agenda

Starting with the 2012 New Delhi Declaration—issued after the Arab Spring had begun producing widely varying outcomes across the Middle East and Northern Africa[3], and following major escalation in fighting in Syria—the BRICS summit documents began directly addressing the Syrian conflict. The New Delhi Declaration ('Fourth Summit: Delhi Declaration and Action Plan' 2012) made three points in reference to Syria. First, it called for the international community to deal with the crisis through "peaceful means that encourage broad national dialogues that reflect the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty." Second, the coalition welcomed efforts by the UN, including the appointment of Kofi Annan as Joint Special Envoy on the Syrian crisis, and by the Arab League. Third, the declaration encouraged the Syrian government "and all sections of Syrian society" to muster the political will to initiate such an inclusive political process. That year's declaration thus upheld established organizations, namely the UN and the Arab League, as the most legitimate external actors in addressing the crisis, even as the coalition also called for a political resolution to the conflict by Syrian groups. These stances can be understood not only in reference to the member states' individual interests in the Middle East and stances towards the region's instability—notably their strong preference at that time for non-interference, including in the Arab Spring movements—but also with respect to the nature and structural location of the BRICS within the international order at that time: namely, as a loose and incipient coalition of rising powers, rather than a full-fledged international organization with codified policies.

Gaps in content can be as telling as the points included in an official document. It is worth noting, then, that the New Delhi BRICS declaration made no reference to mediation efforts undertaken outside the scope of the UN and the Arab

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[2] For instance In the 2013 meeting in Durban, the BRICS "call the parties should resolve their differences through peaceful means and dialogue in which the UN and regional organizations should as appropriate play their role. We also express support for the African Union High-Level Panel Initiative on Libya."

[3] With respect to the Arab Spring, the Delhi Declaration makes vague statements in reference to the "turbulence" in the Middle East and Northern Africa, expressing the shred desire for these countries and their populations to experience peace and "regain stability and prosperity" (Point 19).

League, such as the consultations by the IBSA countries in Damascus, held in 10 August 2011, when a delegation of foreign ministers from the three countries met with Assad ('Statement to the Press from IBSA about consultations held in Syria – Damascus, August 10, 2011' 2011). The Syrian president had reassured the IBSA delegation that he was committed to a reform process designed to create a multi-party democracy, including through a revised constitution formulated in consultation with the Syrian people due to be completed by March of 2012. Assad also acknowledged that some mistakes had been made by the Syrian security forces when popular unrest first broke out, but reassured the IBSA delegation that his government was implementing measures to prevent them from reoccurring (Dikshit 2011).

The absence of any mention of the IBSA effort in the BRICS declaration from that year can be interpreted not only as a result of the mediation attempt's lack of results, but also as a reflection of the fact that the initiative was undertaken by another coalition altogether. Rather than a subset of the BRICS, the IBSA (launched in June 2003) has existed as a grouping for longer than the BRICS, and over time it developed an agenda of its own, as well as an identity that is distinct from that of the BRICS (namely, that the IBSA has been heavily influenced by the three members' status as diverse democracies located outside the UN Security Council). The non-mention of the IBSA mediation effort also underscored the BRICS' stance, at that point, that established global and regional organizations were the most legitimate venue for the international community to deal with the Syrian crisis. This represented, in essence, a conservative-legalistic perspective by the BRICS, considering that part of the motivation behind the coalition's founding was the ambition of transforming global governance.

b) Durban: Assad's Appeal to the BRICS

By the 2013 BRICS summit in Durban, South Africa (5th Summit, held March 25-27), the coalition had begun discussing the Syrian crisis in greater detail. Assad was nearly isolated on the international scene, and the legitimacy of his government was increasingly contested by the international community. At the Arab League summit in Qatar, the Syrian seat was filled not by a representative of the Assad regime but by Moaz al-Khatib, who had led the main opposition umbrella group, the National Coalition ('Moaz al-Khatib: Address to the Arab League' 2013) (that November, the Arab League would suspend Syria's membership altogether). Assad then sent a letter to the BRICS, delivered during the summit, requesting the coalition's help in halting the conflict while protecting Syria's territorial integrity against groups he denominated as "terrorists" by rebuffing "blatant foreign interference" that would, in Syria's view, contradict the UN Charter:

> *"You, with all the huge political, economic and cultural weight you represent that seeks to consolidate peace, security and justice in the troubled world of today, are called upon to exert all possible efforts to end the suffering of the Syrian people [...] [the BRICS is] "a just force that seeks to spread peace, security and cooperation among countries away from hegemony, its dictates and oppression which have lasted for decades upon our peoples and nation."* (Gladstone & Droubi 2013)

Seeing himself isolated on the world scene, it is no surprise that Assad turned to a coalition that had presented itself—if not revolutionary in the sense of trying to upend the existing international order—then at least an "outsider group" willing to contest norms and push for substantive reform of key institutions.

Although the coalition did not issue an open reply to Assad's message, in that year's declaration ('Fifth Summit: eThekwini Declaration and Action Plan' 2013), the BRICS condemned the violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law resulting from the escalating violence—without specifying particular groups. Instead, the BRICS once again referred the Syrian issue to the UN, expressing support for the Joint Communiqué of the Geneva Action group (*Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 2012*) (now referred to as Geneva I Conference on Syria) as providing "a basis for resolution of the Syrian crisis and affirm any further militarization of the conflict," as well as calling for respect for "Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty". This stance can be understood as geared specifically toward the US and NATO, which the BRICS had previously criticized for carrying out unilateral military interventions that infringed on national sovereignty and produced disastrous results.

The Durban declaration also honed in on the humanitarian crisis associated with the intensifying conflict. The document "upon all parties to allow and facilitate immediate, safe, full and unimpeded access to humanitarian organizations to all in need of assistance" and urged parties to "ensure the safety of humanitarian workers." This position reflects the growing relevance of the BRICS countries, both individually and collectively, as humanitarian actors, whether (such as Brazil) through contributions to UN programs, funds and agencies, or via direct participation in disaster relief efforts, as in the cases of China and India after earthquakes and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; indeed, the coalition had begun to exchange ideas on humanitarianism, although linking it primarily to natural disasters and the responses to such emergencies.

Nevertheless, this growing attention to certain aspects of humanitarian action did not prevent some observers to call upon the BRICS to be more proactive in addressing the Syrian humanitarian crisis; writing in the Brookings Institution website, for instance, Shaikh (2013) argued that the BRICS should "support a more aggressive effort to ramp up the UN's cross-border aid operations inside

the country," and that the five countries ought to "use their influence to secure a Security Council endorsement of this approach, principally by applying pressure on Russia and China." However, the five countries' stance on non-intervention, which had been reinforced by their perceptions of the Libyan intervention's outcome, kept the coalition's statements vague and precluded any concrete coordination on this issue within the UN.

Adding to this was the fact that, outside the bounds of the coalition, there were growing geopolitical tensions at play. The Russian government was reportedly concerned that the type of substitution of the Assad regime with opposition coalitions seen in the Arab League would be repeated within the UN, further isolating its ally and thus weakening Russia's own foothold in the region. Moscow also continued to worry about Western intervention in Syria. Earlier that year, the Obama administration had considered launching air strikes after the Assad regime used chemical weapons, crossing a self-imposed "red line" (ultimately, Obama opted not to intervene unilaterally, not only due to opposition from Congress and the uncertainty of the outcome, but also because Russia offered to dispose of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile).

Although Russia's gesture helped to diffuse tensions over the US-drawn red line, geopolitical antagonism continued to escalate between the Moscow and Washington. Media outlets reported that, during his flight back from Durban to Moscow, Putin issued an order to hold large-scale military exercises in the Black Sea area (Russia 2013). Because the area borders Turkey, the move was interpreted by some observers as a warning against foreign intervention in Syria ('BRICS Summit draws clear red lines on Syria, Iran' 2013). The growing geopolitical antagonism between Russia and the US, which had manifested itself in Eastern Europe, began to be felt more acutely in the Middle East. It also helped to explain why, although both Washington and Moscow increasingly framed the Syrian conflict in terms of the threats posed by the spread of violent extremism, they have had great difficulty in collaborating on the issue.

This sharpening global power rivalry coincided with the increasing salience of terrorism in Syria, particularly because the group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS or Daesh) proclaimed a caliphate and rapidly expanded its territorial control over parts of Iraq and Syria. Despite the geopolitical layers of the conflict and the elements of social discontent that had triggered protests and violence in the first place, Moscow and Damascus began amplifying their discourse that the Syrian conflict was primarily about combating terrorism. Eventually, as the next declarations show, this reframing effort became a cornerstone of the BRICS coalition's conception of the Syrian war.

c) Fortaleza: The Growing Focus on Terrorism and Humanitarian Access

In the summit held in Fortaleza, Brazil (6th Summit, July 15-16, 2014), the coalition's attention was heavily focused on economic cooperation, especially the launch of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). Development financing became the "path of least resistance" for the coalition—the area in which they found the most common interest and least obstacles to joint projects, and therefore the easiest path to institutionalizing the BRICS (Abdenur & Folly 2015).

However, international conflicts apart from Libya and Syria were looming large in the international agenda and prompting responses by both individual BRICS and the coalition as a whole. In September 2013, in a comment piece in the New York Times, Vladimir Putin had openly addressed the US government and the American people, cautioned against US intervention in Syria (Putin 2013). In February 2014, the international community's attention turned to Crimea. In the aftermath of the annexation, China, Brazil, India and South Africa (along with 54 other nations) all abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution criticizing the Crimea referendum, a move that was widely interpreted in the West as essentially supporting the Russian position (Diplomat 2014).

However, this backing was only partial: Brazil, India, China and South Africa were not among the ten states joining Russia in voting against the non-binding resolution ('UNGA A/RES/68/262 Territorial Integrity of Ukraine' 2014). The stance of the other BRICS regarding the Crimea crisis hinted at their future behavior with respect to the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015: a distancing that is read by many Western actors as tacit approval, and that can be explained as a decision to accommodate or even cave into their fellow BRICS member (Russia) so as to maintain the cohesiveness of the coalition.

Against this complex geopolitical backdrop, in its references to Syria the Fortaleza declaration ('Sixth Summit: Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan' 2014) underscored the coalition's concern with the deteriorating humanitarian situation. The BRICS also reiterated that "there is no military solution to the conflict," highlighting "the need to avoid its further militarization" and stressing the necessity of a political solution through national dialogue and reconciliation. Here the BRICS were trying to de-link humanitarian issues from military intervention, since they felt that the former had been wrongfully used in the past to justify regime change by Western powers.

This time, however, the BRICS made a more specific call for a "complete ceasefire" and for the involved parties to "facilitate immediate, safe, full and unimpeded access for humanitarian organizations and agencies, in compliance with the UN Security Council resolution 2139." This is the first mention within the declarations of a more concrete mechanism that could open a path towards a political

solution, and it reflects some of the ideas that were arising in the UN-supported talks and that would eventually feature more prominently in Russia-US negotiations.

By that time, an investigative team appointed by the UN had confirmed the use of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, among others places, and in September 2013 the Assad regime had been pressured into agreeing to relinquishing its chemical weapons under the direction of the Organization for the Proscription of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council and following UN Security Council resolution 2118 ('UNSC S/RES/2118' 2013). The BRICS continued to support other UN efforts at mediating the conflict, including the appointment of Staffan de Mistura as UN Special Envoy to Syria to help coordinate efforts to create dialogue channels for Syrian groups.

However, it was also in the Fortaleza declaration that the BRICS official discourse began to place an even stronger stress on terrorism as a salient aspect of the Syrian conflict. The term terrorism, in fact, begins to appear in clusters in the declarations, for instance with four references in just two contiguous sentences (emphasis mine):

> *We reiterate our condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, wherever it occurs. We are gravely concerned at the continued threat of terrorism and extremism in Syria. We call on all Syrian parties to commit to putting an end to terrorist acts perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, its affiliates and other terrorist organizations.*

The attention paid to the idea of terrorism is not surprising given that three of the BRICS – Russia, India and China—list violent extremism among their main national threats, and that those governments often note the international connections of groups they consider to be terrorist[4]. In 2016, India and China, despite their history of modulated antagonism on security issues, have begun cooperating bilaterally on terrorism issues (Dasguptal 2016). There is thus not only some parallels in these three countries' discourses regarding terrorism, but also concrete mechanisms through which they begin to collaborate on this issue.

Brazil and South Africa, on the other hand, have been more critical or aloof from debates about terrorism, either due to skepticism about the labeling of many[5] insurgent or separatist groups as such for political reasons, or due to the relative

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[4] The Russian government has a strong discourse of combating terrorism among Muslim insurgents in Chechnya, Dagestan and other parts of the country and has expressed concerns about extremist groups' international ties. The Chinese government labels separatist groups in Xinjiang, especially those of Uyghur origin, as terrorists whose networks receive support from Central Asia. And India accuses militant groups of terrorism, claiming they receive support from networks in Pakistan.

[5] Interview with Brazilian diplomat, Brasília, May 2016.

distance (geographic) from major terrorist attacks to date. This discrepancy, in turn, suggests that Russia has found in China and India support for its efforts to focus the coalition's attention more heavily on the issue of terrorism, thereby strengthening the justification for any future intervention by Russia.

Some degree of agreement among Russia, China and India on this issue may also be attributable to the fact that all three countries have not only maintained full diplomatic ties to the Syrian government, but also kept their embassies in Damascus. Brazil and South Africa, on the other hand, have also maintained bilateral relations with the Syrian government, but at a lower level of intensity: Brazil has kept only a consulate after evacuating its diplomats to Beirut; South Africa's ambassador to Egypt is accredited on a non-residential basis to Syria, since there is no South African mission in Damascus ('The Syrian Arab Republic' n.d.).

The declaration also mentions the Syrian presidential elections, held on June 3, 2014— the first multi-candidate election in decades since the Ba'ath party first came to power in a coup. The elections had been denounced by opposition groups as unfair, and there were reports, especially in Western media, of boycotts by domestic and foreign-based Syrian opposition groups and of voting not taking place in large parts of the country, especially areas under rebel and Kurdish militia control (Barnard 2014). Although the Fortaleza declaration only references the elections in passing, by adopting a neutral stance the BRICS in essence declined to align with the (mostly Western) condemnations of the electoral process that ended in a landslide victory for Assad. Again, this stance indicates that Moscow began to exert increasing influence over the production of a collective discourse by the BRICS coalition on the Syrian conflict, including with respect to the political dynamics of the civil war.

d) From Ufa to Goa: Before and After Russia's Military Intervention

The next BRICS joint declaration ('VII BRICS Summit UFA Declaration' 2015), issued in Ufa, Russia (7th summit, held July 8-9 2015), was published shortly before the start of Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil war. The stress on the role of terrorism in the Syrian conflict was once again reflected in the summit document, which underscored the "growing threat of international terrorism and extremism in the region." However, this focus featured an innovation in comparison to the previous declaration: in the Ufa document, the BRICS invoked specific and related UN instruments, calling for the "strict implementation by the international community of all provisions of the UN Security Council resolutions 2170, 2178 and 2199, particularly dealing with suppression of financing and other forms of supporting terrorists, as well as for compliance with universally recognized norms of international law related to countering terrorism and extremism, including the principles of respect for the sovereignty of the states." ('Security

Council Adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) Condemning Gross, Widespread Abuse of Human Rights by Extremist Groups in Iraq, Syria | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases' 2015) In addition to situating the issue of terrorism within UN debates and initiatives, the Ufa declaration also linked terrorism to geopolitics, referencing the "spillover effects of the instability in Iraq and Syria resulting in growing terrorist activities in the region, and urge all parties to address the terrorist threat in a consistent manner".

Regarding the humanitarian crisis, the BRICS once again expressed concern with the deteriorating situation, but this time condemning "the politicization of humanitarian assistance in Syria," in particular noting "the continuing negative impact of unilateral sanctions on the socio-economic situation in Syria." The section refers, in general terms, to the debate that was intensifying at that time surrounding the delivery of aid to besieged Syrian towns and the rapidly deteriorating situation in Aleppo, and escalating accusations between the US and Russia that the other was politicizing humanitarian aid by creating obstacles for the delivery of aid.

In the document, the coalition openly supports Russia's political role in trying to push for a solution, but—whereas the coalition once underscored the importance of a UN-led solution, by Ufa the BRICS begin to praise Moscow's initiatives outside of UN bounds, especially its hosting of two rounds of informal meetings with Syrian groups, in January 2015 ('Press release on the start of an inter-Syrian meeting in Moscow' 2015) and in March 2015 (after which Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with de Mistura ('Press release on Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Staffan de Mistura' 2015). These meetings were held after the UN-backed Geneva II Conference, in early 2014, failed to produce a solution to the crisis[6], and to some extent the coalition's stance reflected the broader international community's growing fatigue with the UN-brokered process, as well as the growing (if silent) recognition that the US and Russia had made themselves into the most indispensable actors in any political solution to the conflict, at least for initial steps such as a general cease-fire arrangement.

Just weeks after the Ufa declaration was issued, however, Russia assumed a direct military role in Syria. The intervention was launched in September 2015, following an official request from the Syrian government for military assistance against rebel and jihadist groups. After Russia's upper house granted permission, Russia carried out air strikes (naming Daesh as the official target) by aircraft stationed in the Khmeimim base, southeast of Latakia. The strikes primarily targeted areas of northwest Syria concentrating military groups opposing the Syrian government, including the Syrian National Coalition, Daesh, al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda

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[6] These consultations were met with mostly negative reactions outside of Russia (AE article, etc) and some analysis believe it was an attempt to unite a more pro-regime opposition.

in the Levant), and the Army of Conquest ('Russia carries out first air strikes in Syria' 2015). In addition, Russian military advisors and special operations forces, the Spetsnaz, were sent to Syria, and naval infantry were used to secure a port in Tartus and the area surrounding an airfield in Latakia, as well as to help seize the historic site of Palmyra from Daesh.

That fall, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), a working group formed to find a political solution to the crisis, was formed during the Vienna Talks of November 2015, with the US and Russia as co-chairs. While Intra-Syrian Talks, mediated by de Mistura's team, have been tailored towards bringing together the different Syrian warring parties, the ISSG became, in effect, a platform for attempts to negotiate among the geopolitical players in the war. China was also among the founding members, while Brazil, India, and South Africa have stayed out of the working group—signaling another distancing in level of engagement between the two BRICS that hold permanent seats at the UNSC, and the three that do not.

In February, Russia led an intensive bombardment of Aleppo, with major casualties and displacement of civilians adding to the outflow of refugees into neighboring countries and other regions. The Russian intervention was a major geopolitical landmark, in that it was the first time that Russia launched a major military incursion beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. Moscow's initiative was presented by both the Russian government and its Syrian ally as an effort to combat terrorism, and Assad personally thanked Putin during a surprise visit to Moscow (The Guardian n.d.). While the other BRICS have not put "boots on the ground," China has announced that it will step up not only humanitarian assistance to Syria, but that it has also discussed with Damascus the idea of boosting bilateral defense cooperation by training Syrian troops ('China "to provide aid, enhance military training" in Syria – top army official' 2016).

The BRICS declaration for the 2016 summit, due to be released at the Goa, India summit in October, will thus the first BRICS statement issued after Russia assumed a direct military role in the Syrian conflict. In the preparations leading up to the summit, the coalition held a meeting of BRICS security advisers to hammer out parts of the security agenda for Goa. According to Indian media outlets, in addition to deepening defense and military cooperation ties among the five countries, the meeting was expected to "focus firmly on terrorism, the Syria situation and developments related to the South China Sea (Gupta 2016)". One major newspaper reported that "India wants BRICS countries to forge a common front against terrorism in the subcontinent and would like to see the Islamic State rooted out of Syria. (Gupta 2016)" However, as of this writing the coalition lacks any mechanism for sharing intelligence or devising cooperative approaches to

violent extremism, including the Syrian context, so any decisions that come out of these initiatives are likely to remain at the discursive level.

The timing may also be related to the efforts by Moscow and Washington to implement a lasting cease-fire, although during the September 2016 General Assembly that initial effort floundered in part due to violations of the cessation of hostilities by both sides. Nonetheless, the BRICS defense adviser's meeting agenda shows that the Syrian conflict has entered the BRICS discussions at several levels, from head of state to ministerial, as part of a broader agenda on conflict hotspots, and that other BRICS, especially India and China, are likely to back Russia's efforts to underscore the role of terrorism in the Syrian civil war, as reflected in the past three BRICS declarations. In turn, the attention paid by the BRICS coalition has generated new expectations about the role it could play in helping the Middle East in 2015, for instance, Jeenah (2015) appealed to the BRICS to use the New Development Bank to finance infrastructure projects in the countries that have been receiving the bulk of Syrian refugees (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt), noting that—although the UN has estimated that these countries would collectively need US$5.5 billion in 2015 alone to fund their response to the Syria crisis, their status as middle income countries within the World Bank loan scheme renders them ineligible to receive certain kinds of assistance from the established development financing organizations. This gap, in turn, creates an opportunity for the BRICS to have a direct and positive effect in the Middle East by attenuating some of the spillover effects from the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relevance of a loose coalition of rising powers, the BRICS, in international security by analyzing their stances towards, and roles in, the Syrian conflict. Unlike an established multilateral organization, this "platform of convenience" is part of a fluid, interlocking network of multilateral arrangements that give individual actors multiple arenas in which to negotiate (or avoid) agenda items. The role of the BRICS in international security must be understood within this broader context of forum-shopping, which is enabled by the decentralization of global governance and the emergence of new coordinating platforms like the BRICS, IBSA, or the G-20.

Despite finding more common ground in economic and development issues than in security ones, the BRICS coalition has repeatedly positioned itself with respect to specific armed conflicts, particularly Libya and Syria. In the case of the Syrian war, the BRICS stances are at first vague statements expressing the wish for peace, but over time—even if the coalition has at no point suggested a concrete path to resolving the crisis—its official statements have come to include support for specific mechanisms that emerged either through the UN or outside of that

architecture.

In the first years of the BRICS coalition's existence, the central theme in international security that the four countries (later five, with the 2011 inclusion of South Africa) grappled with was the military intervention in Libya and its aftermath. While these countries' respective positions on non-intervention were neither equivalent nor completely rigid, they reached a point of convergence in their common criticism of the way in which R2P was invoked to justify the military intervention. The related normative debates at the UN over the use of force, as along with the failure to stabilize Libya, helped to shape the BRICS' collective stance on the Syrian conflict early on in the civil war. More specifically, the five countries either opposed or refused to endorse military intervention by the international community on the same grounds as had been drawn upon in the case of Libya—stances that filtered into their annual summit declarations. And, although other factors helped block military intervention in Syria via the UN or by the US (whether unilaterally or via an ad hoc coalition), the BRICS proved to be a relevant force by essentially acting as a "norms blocker", that is, restraining the application of R2P in Syria. The coalition did not, however, engage in norms entrepreneurship, although some of its member states, primarily Brazil and China, made partial attempts to refine or revise the R2P normative framework.

By the 2013 BRICS Summit in Durban, the Syria conflict loomed large on the coalition's security agenda. Although the democratic BRICS member states, working through the separate IBSA platform, briefly attempted to mediate the intensifying conflict, they were unable to achieve concrete results, and the initiative went unacknowledged in BRICS documents. Their membership overlap notwithstanding, there are significant differences in the collective identities, agendas, and level of institutionalization of these two coalitions; and the BRICS' official positions and documents reflect a desire to develop and institutionalize a collective agency in its own right, including in the security realm. At any rate, since then IBSA has lost political clout, appearing less and less among the foreign policy priorities of its member states. Meanwhile, the BRICS—economic deceleration and some political changes in member states notwithstanding—has expanded in relevance by launching new institutions, such as the NDB, and by diversifying the topics covered in summits and ministerial meetings.

The single biggest factor in reshaping the BRICS discourse on Syria, however, has to be explained in light of the preferences and behavior of a single state: namely, Russia's increased engagement with armed conflict, first through its role in the Crimea crisis and, more recently, through its open support for the Assad regime and direct entry into the Syrian conflict. Although the Russian perspective on Crimea was that it was reincorporating a region that was inhabited predominantly by ethnic Russians, to Western countries the annexation represented a

hypocritical infringement of the same concept of national sovereignty that Russia tends to defend within the UN. The case of Crime ended up creating some tension in the BRICS' collective defense of the concept of sovereignty in security issues--although it was not abandoned altogether, as the successive summit declarations show. Russia's role in the Syrian war also posed some contradictions for the BRICS' insistence that a political solution through inclusive negotiation is the only solution to the crisis, because the growing alignment between Moscow and Damascus makes the coalition, by association, closer to one of the parties in the conflict, even if this alignment is indirect and tacit. At any rate, the ties between Moscow and Damascus increase the likelihood that the Assad regime will also remain an indispensable actor in the resolution of the war.

Over the past two years, as Daesh and, to a lesser extent, al-Nusra become more salient in media reports and political discourse around the Syrian conflict, Russia's direct participation in the conflict has caused the BRICS collectively to reframe the civil war heavily (and excessively narrowly) in terms of terrorism. Russia is unlikely to be the sole driving force behind this effort, since both China and India also have strong interest in fighting terrorism, in part because they face separatist groups internally that are categorized as such by those respective governments. However, the same cannot be said of South Africa and especially Brazil, whose diplomatic discourse, quite on the contrary, has often been skeptical or openly critical of how categories such as terrorism are invoked to legitimize military action. The fact that the concept of terrorism has come to permeate the BRICS' collective stance on Syria suggests that Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi have had a strong influence on the coalition's perspectives on the conflict, and that these member states are likelier to find common stances if not concrete cooperation over this issue.

A third ambiguity arising in the BRICS declarations concerns the coalition's view of the UN as the most legitimate venue for engaging with the conflict and of the mechanisms established by the organization in order to work towards a peaceful resolution. While the BRICS coalition is far from the only actor expressing frustration at the lack of progress stemming from the Geneva talks—in addition to Russia and the US, various actors in the Middle East, including Egypt and the Arab League, have supported other mediation arrangements—their stance on the Syrian conflict is shaped in part by their sometimes ambivalent view of the UN itself: even as the BRICS uphold the UN as the most legitimate venue for collective action, the coalition is also increasingly willing to endorse mediation initiatives for Syria undertaken outside of its architecture, especially when driven by Russia. Given that the BRICS is itself something of a selective "outsiders' group"—albeit a reformist rather than one—it finds it easier to toggle between UN-led solutions and arrangements undertaken outside of that architecture altogether.

Thus, even though among the BRICS countries Russia is by far the most directly involved actor in the Syrian conflict, the coalition as a whole remains an important (if not indispensible) actor in the Syrian conflict, whether this relevance is expressed through engagement (military, mediation or otherwise) or disengagement. Given the receptivity of the Assad regime to the BRICS, it is not implausible that, in the case of a conflict resolution scenario in which the regime remains an important actor, there will be concrete demands for peacebuilding efforts by the BRICS, whether collectively—for instance, through the NDB—or individually. Given their experiences in infrastructure construction, technical cooperation, social policy experiments, and South-South cooperation more broadly, these states may end up shaping post-conflict reconstruction in Syria and development in its neighboring countries, provided also that the BRICS states remain "rising" (rather than stagnant or submerging) powers willing to engage hands-on outside their own vicinities.

Future research on the role and relevance of the BRICS, however, still needs to be deepened and broadened. There is, for instance, a considerable lacuna in the analysis of individual BRICS states' history, interests, and roles in Syria and the broader region. The coalition, after all, may be more than the sum of its parts, but—as the case of Russia and the Syrian conflict shows—it remains a loose platform for coordinating positions, and as a result, its stances and behavior can be strongly influenced by the preferences and limitations of one or more of its members, depending on the issue at hand. Finally, more research is needed on how different Syrian actors, whether the Assad regime itself, rebel groups, or other geopolitical players involved in the conflict, view the BRICS's relevance to the conflict and its resolution. These lines of research would help to elucidate whether, and to what extent, the BRICS will become more important players not only in normative debates about international security, but also concrete cases of major armed conflict, in the Middle East and other regions.

Bio

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