

*Book Review*

# Russia, BRICS and the Disruption of Global Order

Rachel S. Salzman

Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019,  
208 pp, US\$ 32.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781626166615

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Two of the most familiar narratives of the 21st century so far have been the geopolitical reemergence of Russia and the rise of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), a diplomatic coalition which has assertively promoted global governance reform for over a decade. What is the intersection between these phenomena? How did a very heterogeneous constellation of emerging economies become a key priority of Russian foreign policy? Which factors could explain Moscow's specific patterns of engagement within BRICS and towards the group?

These issues are examined in *Russia, BRICS and the Disruption of Global Order* by Rachel Salzman, a visiting scholar in the Department of European and Eurasian Studies of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a former postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies of Georgetown University. While this is her first book, she previously published several articles on the topic (Salzman 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2017).

The volume consists of six chapters. After an introduction that outlines the book's main ideas, the first chapter discusses Russia's uneasy relationship with the Western-led international system since the collapse of the USSR. The author stresses that Moscow's interest in BRICS derives from domestic factors, such as the consolidation of "sovereign democracy" and elite debates on Russia's national (or civilizational) identity, as well as external developments, namely Moscow's ambivalent posture towards the post-Cold War security order in Europe. She argues that Russia views BRICS primarily as a political coalition aimed at fostering multipolarity, countering US hegemony and enhancing its members' global status, not as a mechanism of economic cooperation – a reasoning supported by the fact that intra-group trade and investment levels remain low, except for China's robust economic relations with all other members.

Salzman then portrays an institutional history of BRICS. She points out that the group was not the first attempt at an informal mechanism between large emerging nations, having been preceded by the RIC (Russia, India and China) strategic triangle, proposed in 1996 by Russian statesman Yevgeny Primakov; the IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) forum, launched in 2003; and the Outreach 5 (Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa), a cluster of countries occasionally invited to G8 summits after 2003. This information is vital to comprehend that BRICS is not primarily a catchphrase devised by an investment bank, as often claimed, but the consequence of a conscious political decision by governments that shared the belief in a “world order that allows for a multiplicity of domestic orders rather than the perceived imposition of a single set of norms and standards” (p. 30). Russia, as Salzman notes, was a leader in this process, having hosted the first ministerial and presidential meetings of the group in Yekaterinburg.

The three subsequent chapters, which form the book’s core, debate the significance of BRICS and its predecessors for Russian foreign policy since 2000. Salzman’s fundamental hypothesis is that Moscow’s interest in BRICS has been transactional, opportunistic and tactical. In her view, the group’s importance for Russia initially peaked during the 2008-2009 financial crisis, when BRIC (then still without the “S” of South Africa) successfully pushed for an increase in the voting power of developing nations at the International Monetary Fund. Afterwards, she believes, BRICS was relegated to a “theoretical alternative option deployed as a bargaining chip in other forums” (p. 59) and a “Potemkin village” of political rhetoric during most of the Medvedev presidency, when Moscow’s relations with the West were generally cooperative.

A second watershed moment arose with the events of 2014 in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, when BRICS efficiently shielded Russia from criticism and the threat of isolation at the UN General Assembly, the G20 and other multilateral bodies. At this point, the reasoning goes, Moscow attempted to position BRICS no longer as a “bridge” to maximize influence in Western-led institutions, but as a “bulwark” against US/European encroachment in Russian strategic objectives. This momentum would not last, however, since a disillusionment with the institutional effectiveness of BRICS led Moscow to prioritize other projects, such as the Great Eurasian Partnership structured around the Eurasian Economic Union, according to Salzman.

The following chapter compares Russian perspectives of BRICS with those of China and India. It underlines that Moscow’s capacity to shape and influence the group is constrained by the geopolitical and economic interests of Beijing and New Delhi, both of which are increasingly integrated into the global economy, generally benefit from the current structure of international governance and do not wish to see BRICS adopting an explicitly anti-Western character.

In her conclusion, Salzman claims that BRICS is “no longer a big story in global governance” (p. 138), having lost prominence to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and to the strategic uncertainty stemming from political crises in Europe and North America. She enumerates three conceivable alternatives for the group’s future: a condition of *stasis*, deemed the most probable, in which BRICS would remain active but inertial, maintaining a critical rhetoric while achieving few concrete results; the risk of *implosion*, should BRICS cease to function due to tensions between two of its members, possibly China and India; and the potential of *constructive contribution* that may unfold if BRICS could define a positive cooperation agenda and be accepted as a legitimate interlocutor by the West. The author also warns that a rift may eventually arise between Russia, which “feels no real stake in the preservation of the existing governance system” (p. 143), and the other BRICS, whose approaches to the global order are cautious and evolutionary.

*Russia, BRICS and the Disruption of Global Order* is a concise, elegantly written and generally balanced work. Salzman comprehensively ascertains the main internal and external drivers of Russian foreign policy through appropriate research methods, such as discourse analysis, expert interviews and a literature review of Russian sources. It is also encouraging to note that the book was released by a publishing house affiliated with a leading US university. This is uncommon. The story of BRICS has been told before, but mostly by scholars of the concerned countries themselves, or by those who study global governance and the Global South (Stuenkel 2015, de Coning, Mandrup & Odgaard 2015, Kirton & Larionova 2018, among others). In contrast, Western authors tend to see BRICS as a passing intellectual fad or as an artificial political construct that would inevitably crumble under the weight of its contradictions. Salzman’s work will contribute to mitigate this distortion.

Yet there is also room for improvement in at least three respects. Firstly, Salzman’s analysis of the role of Brazil and South Africa within BRICS is somewhat superficial. She correctly points out that these countries are relatively peripheral from the standpoint of Russia, and that their foreign policies have been partially hindered by recent domestic crises, but this is not enough to adequately explain how their specific interests and agendas also influence the group’s direction. Given that the volume includes a remarkably perceptive chapter on Chinese and Indian views of BRICS, it is to be hoped that future editions will be expanded to reflect the perspectives of Brasília and Pretoria as well.

Secondly, the assertion that BRICS “will not fulfill the promise of the 2014 summit in Fortaleza and become a more substantial and institutionalized organization” (p. 133) may be premature. New and tangible initiatives of intra-group cooperation are still being devised, particularly concerning health, financing for development and science, technology and innovation. For example, the recent

Chinese and South African presidencies of the group, in 2017 and 2018, allowed for the creation of joint research platforms on vaccines and tuberculosis, a network of technology parks and new offices of the New Development Bank (the BRICS Bank) in Brazil and Russia.

More to the point, it is entirely normal for international forums to change and adapt. It could be argued that multilateral institutions have a life cycle that derives from their capacity to transform themselves to face new challenges, particularly in circumstances of multipolarity (Cohen 2018). A case in point was the successful reinvention of the G20 – previously a technical gathering of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and now the main platform of global macroeconomic coordination at the head of state level – during the 2008 financial crisis. Likewise, there is no reason to believe that BRICS will not be able to adapt to the changing political preferences of some of its members. The writing is not on the wall for the group.

Thirdly, and most crucially, the concluding chapter sometimes fails to reach the high standards of academic impartiality that were kept throughout the book. By arguing that BRICS “has had a detrimental effect (...) on the stability of the current system” (p. 140) and may even cause the “gradual weakening of the integrity of the current order” (p. 142), the author replicates, perhaps unwittingly, the sceptical assessment displayed by the Washington foreign policy establishment towards the group. This is not an isolated case: to a considerable extent, US research in International Relations (IR) – not unlike what occasionally transpires in some members of BRICS – has traditionally been oriented towards the achievement of governmental objectives. Salzman’s comment that “the line between state and academia in Russia is somewhat blurred” (p. 78) could ironically be applied to her own country as well, at least in the discipline of IR.

It might have more accurate to acknowledge, as other parts of the book seemed to imply, that the rise of BRICS as a diplomatic coalition represents – among other things – a symptom of the current international order’s crisis of legitimacy, rather than the cause of that crisis.

These shortcomings do not alter the fact that *Russia, BRICS and the Disruption of Global Order* is a timely, nuanced and sophisticated effort to cast light on a frequently debated but usually misunderstood subject. The volume is highly recommended for scholars and policymakers interested in BRICS, Russian foreign policy and the evolution of global governance.

## **Bio**

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versity Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow. His doctoral research discusses the evolving meanings of multipolarity in the discourses and cognitive maps of the foreign policy elites of the BRICS countries. Previously he worked at the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations in New York (2014-2018) and at the Embassy of Brazil in Pakistan (2011-2014). He holds MA degrees in International Security from the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po, 2008) as well as in Diplomacy from the Brazilian Diplomatic Academy (Rio Branco Institute, 2011). The views expressed here are strictly personal and do not represent the positions of the Government of Brazil.

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