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Article

The BRICS and the Arab Uprisings, 2011-20

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Abstract

How have the BRICS countries responded to the changes unfolding in the Middle East since 2011? What insights can be gained by their reaction to the region's conflicts over the past decade? Doing so is relevant since it moves analysis of the BRICS beyond their initial economic association to questions of global governance and regional security. The Arab uprisings were notable because they began at a time when all five BRICS countries were on the UN Security Council (UNSC) and therefore at the forefront of the international community's response to the emerging crisis and subsequent challenges. Drawing on a study of individual behaviour by the BRICS countries alongside collective statements from the group, the study reveals that despite some variations between the authoritarians (Russia, China) and democracies among the BRICS, the five all broadly embraced the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention. In practice, this meant that they were more inclined towards the regimes over their populations and demands for social change. Overall, though, it was the authoritarians who had the most lasting regional impact. In addition to greater Russian activism in Syria and Libya, the authoritarians benefited from structural factors, including their permanent UNSC membership and China's preponderant position in the global economy.

Keywords

BRICS, Arab Uprisings, Sovereignty, Intervention, Protests, Society

Introduction

What has been the BRICS record in relation to the Arab uprisings? What does it tell us about the role of rising powers in relation to social and political protests as well as the relationship between states and societies and their stance towards the international system more generally? Although the BRICS constitute only one group of non-Western countries, their interaction with the uprisings was notable because all five of them were on the UNSC at their onset in early 2011. Moreover, the BRICS are a worthy group of state actors to study, since they constitute one of the more notable and visible groups of emerging or rising powers in the world today. As the global system looks to be shifting from an American-led unipolar one towards a more multipolar environment, the presence and role of actors like

the BRICS will likely become more important.

When judging the record of the BRICS towards the uprisings – from their origins and through their unfurling over the subsequent decade – the record is a mixed one. Taking a bird's eye view of global policies depicts the BRICS as a challenge and resistance towards (mostly) Western efforts to shape and direct the uprisings. For observers who wanted to see curbs put on hegemonic behaviour by the US and Europeans then, this was a welcome move. However, for those who identified with the protestors and their demands for better economic opportunities, greater government accountability and more of a say in shaping their countries' futures, the results of BRICS activism were less positive. Whether directly or indirectly, BRICS rhetoric and actions in favour of state sovereignty meant that they effectively supported – whether directly or tacitly – the regimes which repressed their people.

In order to make sense of the BRICS and their response to the Arab uprisings, the paper is set out in the following manner. The first section considers the BRICS as a group, their origin and development and orientation towards the international system, resulting in a contrary position in favour of multilateralism and state sovereignty at the same time. The second section looks at the origin of the Arab uprisings and the BRICS response to them. Instead of viewing the uprisings as a singular event, it considers them as a long-term process, trans-national process which began with growing social discontent among Arab populations before 2011. Particular attention is given to the BRICS reaction in two sites where the uprisings became violent and prompted an international response: Libya and Syria. This early period, during 2011-12, was significant because all five BRICS countries had a direct input into the international response, owing to them all being members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) at the time.

The third section deals with the BRICS responses to Libya and Syria after 2012. This was the period where individual BRICS capacities and level of involvement began to vary more substantially, owing to their presence or otherwise on the UNSC and domestic developments at home. The final section summarizes the actions of the BRICS countries and concludes that on balance the BRICS countries opted for sovereignty over multilateralism and defended states over their societies – albeit with some variation and nuance between the five. That they did so suggests that these states are more conservative than they initially promised. Moreover, if they are representative of other emerging and rising powers, the future will likely look much as it does now.

The BRICS and the international system

Why have the BRICS favoured states over societies during and since the Arab

uprisings? The reasons for this were mostly due to systemic factors, but also contextual ones relating to the uprisings and their subsequent development. First, in systemic terms, the BRICS had emerged at the highpoint of US unipolarity. The BRIC label (South Africa would not join until 2011) was first coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neil at Goldman Sachs who wanted to capture the changes taking place in the global economy, especially the rise of the global South and developing world for trade and investment purposes. At the time, the BRIC constituted no more than a useful acronym for a group of emerging markets; only later would the countries' leaders take it upon themselves to meet at the side of international summits and meetings and coordinate their agendas.

During their first decade, the BRIC countries observed the gap between the values and practice of hegemonic powers in this system (Brosig 2019). Preeminent powers like the US emphasized the liberal nature of the international system, in particular its integrated nature sustained by globalization and multilateral cooperation. They were also prepared to use force unilaterally to pursue its interests, most notably in its invasion and occupation of Iraq after 2003. That grated for many, including the BRIC leaderships, who in response stressed their commitment to multilateralism and state sovereignty (Stuenkel 2015).

Although the BRICS differed between themselves in their commitment to democracy or authoritarianism, Laïdi (2012) noted that state sovereignty was one issue which they all could agree on. Moreover, it was a long-standing one, dating back decades. Both the newly independent India and reunified China saw themselves as standing apart from the West for instance, especially against the former colonial European powers and contemporary imperialist powers like the US and Soviet Union (Hargreave 1984). Notwithstanding communist China's ideological affinity towards Moscow, both it and India shared an association with the developing world in the global South. They both attended the Bandung Conference in 1955, which led to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement. India became a prominent party within it, rejecting the entreaties of the capitalist and socialist camps. China became an observer, a position subsequently adopted by Brazil as well. Brazil's observer status reflected its own pursuit for autonomy and distance from the hemispheric dominance of the US after 1945 and which included greater outreach to the developing world (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2009) – an orientation that was also echoed by South Africa following the end of apartheid (Gqiza and Ogunnubi 2019). As for Russia, its post-Cold War fall from superpower status and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and socialist bloc meant a more diminished role in the world. That contributed to frustration and a sense of grievance which Putin exploited in his aim to recover former Russian "greatness" after 2000 (Lo 2015, Tsygankov 2016).

In sum, the BRICS were acutely aware of the assertiveness of great and super

powers and their own vulnerability. Consequently, they were generally more sympathetic towards measures which might curb the excesses of greater powers. That included a preference for a neo-Westphalian international system in which states had a prominent role and whose sovereignty was inviolable (Brosig 2019). In taking this position, the BRICS contrasted with the prevailing order and constituted a challenge, potentially behaving as spoilers (Schweller 2014).

However, others argued that the BRICS did not seek a wholesale change to the international system. Rather than being confrontational, their demands were more modest, seeking only reform. They wanted a "democratization" of the international system, which was taken to mean they and other rising powers having a say in the global order (Stuenkel 2015, BRIC 2008, 2009). In this reading, the BRICS were less concerned with states' autonomy and more with a more equitable distribution of integration among states. More specifically, they were committed to multilateralism within the liberal order and wanted to have more voting rights in financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank as well as in political bodies. Brazilian and Indian demands for permanent membership on the UNSC similarly fit into this call, even if Russia and China – who already had veto power – were less keen. Alongside other states, the creation of the G20 as a forum for some of the larger countries from the North and South provided a partial balm.

In general then, the there was a tension within the BRICS over the nature of the international system. They defended both sovereignty and non-interference while also being supporters of state interconnectedness, integration and multilateralism. Commitment to these principles could hold rhetorically, but became exposed in practice, including in the early stages and aftermath of the Arab uprisings. This initially became apparent in the case of Libya, when its dictator, Muamar Gaddafi, refused to bow down to public demands.

Beyond the question of whether the BRICS were for or against the prevailing international system is a question regarding the extent to which it is a coordinated or cohesive entity. Although it was portrayed as working in common after 2001, in practice the group was never as unified as it seemed. Laïdi (2012) attributes this both to the common theme which brought them together – state sovereignty – being the very same which undermined those efforts. Looking at BRICS interaction on the UN, Burges (2011) has noted structural and ideological tensions as well as rival claims to leadership have also hindered greater unity. Although the group made economic sense given their "rising" status, politically they were far too disparate, argues Burges. Beyond their own internal political systems and worldviews, their actions and voting behaviour at the UN have rarely been in line. Second, the UN structure has resulted in asymmetric influence: as UNSC permanent members, Russia and China hold veto power while the others are merely aspirants to the same. Third, beyond Russia and China, the claim of leadership

by other BRICS countries are contested, for example by Pakistan towards India's status in South Asia and Argentina by Brazil's in South America.

To these differences is also a question of scale. That has included both economic and political differences between China and the other four, and especially India. Economically, China now dwarves the other BRICS countries and has begun to factor as the principal global rival to the US. Politically, tensions have emerged within the group, especially between China and India over their border and leading to violence. Recognizing the lack of unity, Russia's President Vladimir Putin stated his ambition to improve foreign policy coordination between the BRICS at its 2019 summit. However, the failure to do so has highlighted the BRICS preferred way of working, which is to cooperate where possible and avoid controversial subjects (Ayres 2017, Kapoor 2020).

The BRICS and the start of the Arab uprisings

In viewing the BRICS response to the Arab uprisings, it is important to keep in mind that the protests and demonstrations were not a standalone event but part of a wider process of change which is currently taking place in the Arab world. Although the mobilizations which began during the first half of 2011 were the most visible feature of this trend, it was arguably only the earliest such instance. There were already signs during the previous decade of growing dissatisfaction with economic opportunities and government preparedness and competence to respond; UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports had already noted that people in the region were struggling with precarity and finding it difficult to find good and regular jobs and income and a lack of good public services (UNDP 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009).

Such sentiments have also been at the heart of the protest movements, which took place in the Arab world during 2011 and since the end of 2018, from Sudan and Algeria to Iraq and Lebanon. However, while some have questioned whether the latter protests heralds an Arab Spring 2.0, others suggest it is only the latest manifestation of what is a broader, generational shift-taking place in the region (Fahmi 2019, Bartu 2020).

This expansive notion of a region – its states and peoples – facing structural challenges and pressures for change was not taken on or understood by many political elites, both within or outside the Middle East. Indeed, when the protestors toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011, the initial reaction by some BRICS governments like Brazil, Russia and China, was to acknowledge the recent changes while stressing the need for a peaceful transition in terms of political and economic change (Ministério das Relações Exteriories 2011, Zoubir 2020, Katz 2012, BRICS

2011a). A sense that there were more substantive developments underfoot was not yet evident.

At this stage, the BRICS were in much the same position as the other observers outside the region: the protests appeared to have emerged spontaneously and caught them by surprise. They were geographically distant and for the democracies among the BRICS – Brazil, India and China – their manifestation represented no particular challenge to their own approach to political life (Brosig 2019). By contrast, for the Russian and Chinese leaderships there was more domestic consternation at the developments unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt, in particular the possibility of imitation. That led to both governments to take measures against it (Baev 2011, Pollack 2011).

Whereas the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings unfolded in a largely independent fashion, the Arab uprisings began to acquire a more direct international involvement in the case of Libya. Muammar Gaddafi vowed not to suffer the same fate as Ben Ali and Mubarak and began to make preparations not to budge. Similar calculations were also made by Bashar al-Assad in Syria while Saudi Arabia refused to tolerate the spectacle of protests taking place in Bahrain on its doorstep. In both Libya and Syria, the regimes' resort to repression changed the dynamics of the uprisings; protest and demonstrators gave way to violence as militias were formed to take up arms against the regimes.

The rising violence in both Libya and Syria prompted a shift in thinking about the Arab uprisings and their portrayal in the media. Gaddafi's decision to use force against his own people led to calls for an international response from inside and outside the region (Lynch 2013). Increasingly, the conduct of the uprisings began to be debated in international forums like the UN. That it did so, came at a notable moment since all five BRICS countries were on the UNSC in early 2011. It therefore gave the group greater diplomatic importance than it might otherwise have had – and which became painfully apparent when the three temporary members departed at the end of 2011 and 2012.

It has been previously been noted that as a group the BRICS shared a respect for state sovereignty and an aversion towards foreign intervention, especially military action. Publicly, they declared their commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts, with support from multilateral regional and international organisations. Military force should only be used as a last resort.

That commitment was to be tested in Libya. At first, all five BRICS countries were in line with international opinion. They all voted for Resolution 1970, which condemned the violence and proposed sanctions against the Gaddafi regime, including referring the case to the International Criminal Court.

Although the five had voted together, there were differences among the BRICS countries. The three non-permanent members on the UNSC – Brazil, India and South Africa – were democracies and therefore more sympathetic to the protestors and their demands than Beijing and Moscow. Yet even among them, however, there were differences. South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), had longstanding ties and differences with Gaddafi. Although Gaddafi has supported the ANC during its struggle against the apartheid regime, he also claimed pan-African leadership for himself. That caused irritation in Pretoria. Despite this, President Jacob Zuma led a peace mission to Tripoli in May, but which was overshadowed by the wider international involvement that was emerging (BBC 2011, Kirchick 2011, Solomon and Swart 2005).

In contrast to South Africa (and India), Brazil took a stronger line on the human rights situation in the country than South Africa and India did. It was also more more prepared to refer the Gaddafi regime to the International Criminal Court for its use of violence against the population than its fellow democracies (Brosig 2019). During this period, Brazil also contributed to the wider international debate regarding the appropriate use of intervention. In 2005 UN member states had approved the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) principle to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The norm was employed as justification in Western action against Gaddafi, but which generated unease by other states when it became clear that their motives went further, to remove Gaddafi. Brazil brought up this issue by proposing an addendum to R2P, namely, "Responsibility while Protecting" (RwP), which would set limits and accountability regarding UN-sponsored interventions (Stuenkel 2016, Avezov 2013).

Despite the Brazilian initiative, the UNSC's wider efforts on Libya had little effect on Gaddafi. In response the UNSC debated and passed Resolution 1973 which proposed a no-fly zone and the use of "all necessary measures… to protect civilians… under threat of attack" (Brosig 2019: 66). Brazil, India, Russia and China all abstained, with only South Africa voting in favour. The West – Britain, France and the US – then interpreted the resolution to begin an air campaign against Gaddafi soon after, which generated criticism from the BRICS countries.

The differences between the BRICS on how best to deal with the Libyan crisis was apparent in the modest space given to it at the group's summit in April. In the declaration the leaders limited their words to expressing their wish to continue to cooperate on the matter and the hope that the different parties in Libya resolve their differences through dialogue and with the support of the UN and regional organisations (BRICS 2011a).

The BRICS' suspicion of the West and its motives continued during the early stages of the Syrian uprising. All five were concerned that the West would push

to remove Assad and responded in several ways. Initially, the response was diplomatic: in summer India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) sent a delegation to Damascus in an effort to reconcile the government and opposition – although it only met with the former (Brosig 2019, Bloomfield 2018).[1] When it failed in the face of Western and Arab opposition, a draft resolution was put before the UNSC and backed by the West, which condemned the violence and put the bulk of the blame on Assad. Russia and China vetoed it while Brazil, India and South Africa abstained.

Perhaps in response to this, following a meeting of BRICS deputy foreign ministers in November, they stated that "Any external interference in Syria's affairs, not in accordance with the UN Charter, should be excluded' and proposed a 'thorough review to see if the actions taken [in Libya] were in conformity with the provisions of the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council." (BRICS 2011b) But while the BRICS shared a common opposition to Assad's removal and Western interference, differences were emerging between the BRICS over the most appropriate course of action (Brosig 2019). After Brazil left the UNSC at the end of 2011 a new draft resolution was put forward in February 2012. While military action was ruled out, sanctions were put on the table. India and South Africa voted in favour while Russia and China vetoed it.

From uprising to insurgency and the BRICS response

Efforts by the BRICS to find a common path in response to the Arab uprisings had struggled from the outset. Although they shared some common principles, operationalizing them proved harder. Furthermore, the prospects for any collective and coordinated action diminished after India and South Africa followed Brazil off the UNSC at the end of 2012. That left Russia and China as the two remaining BRICS countries in the UNSC, owing to their permanent status. Of the two, Russia's voice was arguably louder, given its greater involvement in both Syria and (later) Libya (Bronig 2019).

Although Russia and China were the two principal BRICS members on the UNSC in the years that followed, there was little attempt by either state to coordinate their response to subsequent developments in Syria and Libya with the rest of the BRICS or to speak on their behalf. Notwithstanding this, the BRICS did refer to the growing violence in Syria at the New Delhi summit in 2012, where the joint declaration called for peace and "broad national dialogues" and included

[1] IBSA was created in 2003 as a separate entity from the BRICS. The democratic character of the three countries means that their gatherings provide greater space for discussion on issues relating to human rights and civil society than occurs with the BRICS. They are also less encumbered by tensions and rivalries between themselves, as is the case between China and Russia and China and India in the BRICS (see Stuenkel 2012). However, compared to its first decade IBSA's influence began to decline after 2011, the final year that it held a summit. Ministerial meetings only resumed in 2017 and 2018.

"the Syrian government and all sections of Syrian society". (BRICS 2012) Similar sentiments were repeated in subsequent summit declarations in the following years, along with references to curtail terrorism, human rights abuse by all parties and support for Russian efforts at consultation through the alternative Astana process (BRICS 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

After 2012, Assad began to lose control in Syria. The emergence of militant and terrorist groups like ISIS/Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2013-14 not only appealed to fellow Muslims to join them, but invited them to emulate their actions in the Caucasus, Xinjiang and parts of India. Their rise brought the consequences of the uprisings closer to Russia, China and India, who rallied in defence of Assad. Of the three, Russia became a direct participant in the Syrian war from 2015, carrying out airstrikes against terrorists – a label that was interpreted generously to include various rebel groups against Assad. Russia also became a strong supporter of Assad at the international level: while 14 resolutions were passed at the UN between 2015 and 2018, 10 fell, usually owing to Russian vetoes. By 2020, 16 drafts on Syria had failed because of Chinese and Russian vetoes (Adam 2020).

Russia also began to take a more active role in the Libyan conflict from the middle of the decade (Wehry 2018). The country remained fragmented following Gaddafi's defeat and murder in late 2011. Power lay primarily with the various local, regional and tribal armed groups, which had emerged after 2011. From 2014 the former army general and regional warlord, Khalifa Haftar, brought together many of these groups in the east of the country and began a military campaign to take over the country. Russia joined other regional and European countries involved in the struggle by providing military assistance to Haftar, and despite the arms embargo (Lederer 2020). Diplomatically, Russia has also signaled its support in a number of ways, including abstaining on Resolutions 2509, 2510 and 2542 – the last of which China also abstained on – for not taking sufficient note of Libyan concerns (UN 2020a, 202b, 2020c). Russia's involvement has also led to it being criticised by the UN for not adhering to the arms embargo on Libya, an issue which along with the involvement of several outside actors, made the file an "extremely complex and difficult" one for South Africa's representatives, who returned to the UNSC during 2019-20 (Fillion 2020).

Russia's activism in Libya and Syria may be explained by several factors. In Syria Moscow had backed the Syrian government for reasons of national security to reject the Western-sponsored efforts at regime change. Following the fall of Palmyra to ISIS in 2015, Moscow feared Assad was on the verge of collapse. Should he go, both the country and the wider region lay open to the threat of terrorism. Russian intervention was therefore justified on the basis of being invited in by the Syrian government to combat the terrorist threat (Charap, Treyger and Geist 2019, Hayatli 2016).

In Libya Russian involvement began in 2015. Although Moscow's involvement was seen as weighted towards General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army militia, it did not ignore the other parties, conducting outreach both to the internationally recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli as well as other armed groups. In contrast to Syria, where Russia has been solidly behind Assad, in Libya it has been more inclined to achieve compromise between the competing parties (Charap, Treyger and Geist 2019).

For China, a motivating factor was the impact of the growing radicalization stemming from the uprisings, especially the rise of militant and extremist Islamist groups like ISIS and the impact they might have on their own Muslim populations in China and among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Despite the transnational threat posed both by ISIS and other militants, China did not directly intervene in either Syria or Libya. Yet nor has it needed to. Unlike Russia, it does not need to employ coercion to establish its great power status. Of the BRICS countries, China stands apart as the second largest economy in the world and the only rising power that poses a potential global challenger to the US.

As the decade progressed, China's engagement and approach to the region became more assertive, especially following the arrival of Xi Jinping as president. In 2013, he launched the Belt and Road Initiative, which sought to bring Chinese capital together with state elites across the Eurasian landmass to encourage greater connectivity in the form of physical infrastructure projects, better telecommunications and new markets.

The Belt and Road Initiative has since become a central tenet of China's emerging conflict management response to the region. Although not yet formally recognised as such, it has become part of the emerging "peace through development" concept, which has been articulated by some Chinese scholars and diplomats working on the region. In their telling, Chinese support for state-initiated and directed projects in the region that generates improved development outcomes is the most optimal means for countering social unrest and regional instability (Abb 2018, Wang 2019, Burton 2020).

The IBSA group's diplomatic retreat at both a global level and in relation to the Middle East after 2012 was compounded by political and economic shifts at home. India maintained its embassy in Syria and was viewed favourably by the Assad government for not taking a robust stance against it. Although Indian decision makers were torn over the alleged use of chemical weapons in Ghouta in 2013, both the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party governments (which was elected in 2014) sought a balance between international inspections and no foreign interference (Bloomfield 2018, Mehta 2017). To square the circle of Russian intervention, India emphasized Moscow's actions against terrorism. From 2014,

remaining Indian interest declined further as Prime Minister Narendra Modi redirected India's Middle East policy towards Israel and the Gulf monarchies, which promised more in the way of trade and investment (Burton 2019). Diminishing interest and involvement was also a consequence of other factors too, including a growing preoccupation with China's geopolitical footprint in its immediate neighbourhood of Central and South Asia, through the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Kamran and Mahsood 2021).

Economic decline and political disorder at home similarly led to less engagement by Brazil and South Africa (Vadell and Ramos 2019, Van der Merwe 2019). In Brazil, its actions in relation to the Arab uprisings constituted a more modest foreign policy, especially when compared to the previous presidency under Lula (2003-10) (Vigevani and Caladrin 2019). Brazil's retreat from the Middle East during the 2010s contrasted with Lula's activism which had seen him become a regular visitor to the region and an instigator of more regular relations between South America and the Arab world through the APSA conferences which took place between 2005 and 2010. As well as increasing financial contributions to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, he also offered to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians and worked with Turkey to reach an agreement that would have enabled Iran to enrich uranium for its civilian nuclear programme under international supervision and without sanctions in 2010 (Amorim 2017, Oliveira de Carvalho 2019). His successor, Dilma Rousseff, adopted a less proactive foreign policy, both generally as well as in the Arab world.

Following Brazil's departure from the UNSC at the end of 2011, Brazilian activism in relation to the uprisings and their subsequent development slumped. In Brazil, a system of humanitarian visas, which enabled Syrians to seek refuge in the country was established in 2013 (UNHCR 2013). By 2017 around 3000 had taken advantage of the scheme (Garcia 2017). Nevertheless, beyond this, its involvement with the uprisings was marginal. Between 2011 and 2017 trade had declined between Brazil and the Middle East while Brazil's GDP growth fell after 2010 and contracted by 3.5 and 3.2 percent in 2015 and 2016 (Vigevani and Caladrin 2019, World Bank nd).

The period also saw a growing political crisis as corruption enveloped the ruling Workers Party. Although not directly implicated in the Operation Carwash scandal, President Dilma Rousseff was impeached and replaced by her vice-president, Michel Temer, who along with much of the wider political class, turned out to have been involved in the scandal.

National anger and outrage contributed to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, who proposed a reset of Brazilian foreign policy. He abandoned Brazil's traditional search for autonomy in favour of closer alignment with the US and its

allies, including Israel. That included support for Trump's decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and proposal to do the same, although ultimately that promise was downgraded to the opening of a trade office (Abusidu 2020). Economic exchange has become the principal consideration since; in 2019 Bolsonaro visited Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to encourage more trade and investment in Brazil (Brazil-Arab News Agency 2019, 2020).

South Africa similarly experienced slowing growth during the decade, which reduced the country's development prospects. Under President Jacob Zuma (2007-18) the country's foreign policy sought to retain a strong Africanist focus while also encouraging greater South-South cooperation (of which the BRICS was one aspect). That included visits to the Gulf region in search of trade and investment in 2016. However, the government was hampered by self-interest and enrichment by Zuma and his associates, the legitimacy of which is presently being challenged in the hundreds of court cases facing the ex-president (Van der Merwe 2019, Gqiza and Ogunnubi 2019).

Zuma's replacement by Cyril Ramaphosa was heralded as a break with realpolitik. Ramaphosa himself claimed that South Africa's foreign policy would be driven by "democracy, justice, human rights and good governance" and less by adherence to autocratic leaders (Hamill 2019). In 2019, South Africa returned to the UNSC as a temporary member. It voted in favour of all the draft resolutions put forward on both Libya and Syria (and notwithstanding its frustration with the presence of outside parties, especially in Libya). Moreover, it was its votes on Syria where it has attracted criticism.

By now, the scope of the war was largely limited to the northern province of Idlib, where rebel forces held out. Discussion in the UNSC revolved around the question of access for providing humanitarian assistance. At the end of 2019, Russia and China vetoed drafts that would have left the four cross-border checkpoints open in favour of two on the Syrian-Turkish border for six months in Resolution 2504. Then in July 2020, the two countries again vetoed drafts, which would have kept the two points open and eventually abstained on Resolution 2533 that kept one border crossing open for 12 months. In their explanations, Russia and China questioned the need for humanitarian assistance, pointing out that previous approval had taken place during an exceptional period in 2014. In addition, they opposed what they saw as infringements on Syrian sovereignty, including the imposition of unilateral sanctions such as the recently Caesar Act by the US (Security Council Report 2020).

South Africa voted in favour of both resolutions as well as the other, alternate Russian drafts that were put forward in January and July. While its willingness to vote for both the Russian and non-Russian drafts could be read as a determina-

tion to support any way to keep the cross-border mechanism working, it has also prompted criticism for its accommodation of the Syrian regime and its human rights abuses, as well as its Russian and Chinese backers (Security Council Report 2020, Adam 2020).

The focus on Syria (and Libya) not only at the start of the Arab uprisings but also at the end of the decade highlighted the way in which the BRICS leaderships have largely framed them. Rather than viewing them as an expression of pent-up social discontent, they have viewed them in a more limited way, by concentrating on only the most politically extreme and problematic manifestations resulting from them, especially armed conflict, terrorism and the associated humanitarian crisis. To this may also be added a preoccupation with emphasising the sanctity of states' sovereignty and a rejection of any outside interference in their internal affairs (even if it has recently been more honoured in the breach than by observance in the case of Syria and Libya by Russia). This is reflected in the most recent BRICS declarations made, in Brasília in 2019 and Moscow in 2020 where references relating to the Middle East cover the violence, terrorism and the need for humanitarian assistance in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, along with the need to resolve the longstanding Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the tensions between countries in the Gulf (BRICS 2019, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has surveyed the response of the BRICS to the changes in the Middle East over the past decade, with a particular focus on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath. In addition to their collective statements on the conflicts in Syria and Libya in particular, it has also noted their individual behavior and the extent to which some of the countries were more influential on these matters than others.

Broadly, the BRICS shared a common respect for state sovereignty and a wariness to outside interference, especially by the West. However, their commitment to non-intervention was not absolute and there were differences between them regarding under what conditions it might happen, as shown by Russia's direct presence to counter terrorist threats at the invitation of the Syrian regime and Brazilian contemplation at referring Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court for human rights violations.

In overall terms though, the BRICS prioritized the international dimension over developments within states and between governments and societies during the uprisings and after. Their involvement was initially diplomatic and focused on limiting Western efforts to remove leaders like Gaddafi and Assad. An important contribution towards this position was the reaction of the BRICS to Western intervention in Libya and which influenced their subsequent response, whether

through the IBSA diplomatic initiative to Damascus in 2011 or Russian diplomatic (and later direct) support for Assad – a position backed by China.

However, by the time Russia opted for a more direct approach in Syria, the BRICS as a presence on the UNSC was no more. Following Brazil's departure at the end of 2011 followed by South Africa and India a year later, the BRICS ceased to operate as a full group on the UNSC. Over the next few years the most prominent BRICS members on the UNSC – and therefore with access to the international debate over the Middle East – were Russia and China. Certainly, they did not speak on behalf of the group as a whole (with joint declarations after each summit and meeting of relevant ministers being the sum effort at coordination), but they had greater influence as the decade progressed in the aftermath of the uprisings. Both countries owed their position to being permanent UNSC members alongside China's economic influence, which gave it unparalleled weight, and Russia's more direct approach (including intervention in Syria at the invitation of the regime and its outreach to all the conflict parties in Libya).

Both China and Russia were arguably less sensitive to the demands beyond state elites. While Russia's intervention in Syria could be defended on legal grounds, it effectively meant tacit acceptance of one party over another, namely the regime against its opponents, both terrorist and non-terrorist. Meanwhile, although the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime did not unduly trouble either Moscow or Beijing, it presented more of a challenge for the BRICS democracies of Brazil, India and South Africa. However, even among the three, there were differences in their commitment to such principles, for example, Brazil (in 2011) taking a more active stance than India.

Notwithstanding the lack of cohesion and coherence, individually some of the BRICS countries benefited from the uprisings and their consequences. For both its democratic and non-democratic members, the Arab uprisings took place at a time when all five states were members of the UNSC, providing them with an early opportunity to test their influence through a formally constituted international organization (and in contrast to other, looser groupings like the G20). The lessons were instructive, especially the lack of unity beyond the joint statements made at their regular summits. At the same time, to judge them too harshly on this would be a mistake. Certainly, their initial response to the uprisings was a reactive one, but this was in keeping with other, more powerful states like the US as well. Indeed, that made sense since the uprisings' origin were largely domestic and therefore caught almost everyone by surprise – including the governments and their security services supposedly prepared to catch sight of any unrest. More significant for the BRICS however, was the fact that that initial reaction resulted in a "conservative" preference for the status quo – namely the primacy of the state over society – and which also meant less challenge to the Western-dominated

international order.

On the other hand, as the uprisings transformed into armed insurrections and the Western response became more activist – resulting in its intervention in Libya – this prompted a re-evaluation among BRICS countries, the consequences of which did result in a challenge to the prevailing international order. The most obvious example of this was Russia in Syria, echoed by China. But it also came from Brazil too, through its norm generation around "responsibility while protecting".

The lessons drawn from the BRICS experience is arguably similar for other non-Western states and their leaderships. Although multilateralism and sovereignty are strongly supported by other middle powers both inside and outside the region, the limits on their ability to act mean that international cooperation may not be possible. Other examples include middle powers like Malaysia and Indonesia, whose resources and capacities were insufficient to employ directly in relation to the disorder generated in Syria, even as they had to deal with the fallout in the form of radicalized citizens at home and those attempting to travel to the region to join groups like Islamic State. By taking this hands-off approach, middle powers are essentially endorsing another state's sovereignty. By implication, that means extending tacit acceptance of a state's leadership – and in so doing, the absence of a veto over their actions towards the population within their borders.

Bio

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