

BRIC becomes BRICS: Emerging Regional Powers? Changes on the Geopolitical Chessboard

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The world's four main emerging economic powers, known by the acronym BRIC < standing for Brazil, Russia, India and China < now refer to themselves as BRICS.

The capital "S" in BRICS stands for South Africa, which formally joined the four on Dec. 24, bringing Africa into this important organization of rising global powers from Asia, Latin America and Europe. President Jacob Zuma is expected to attend the BRICS April meeting in Beijing as a full member.

This is a development of geopolitical significance, and it has doubtless intensified frustrations in Washington. The U.S. has been concerned about the growing economic and political strength of the BRIC countries for several years. In 2008, for instance, the National Intelligence Council produced a document titled "Global Trends 2025" that predicted:

"The whole international system < as constructed following WW II < will be revolutionized. Not only will new players < Brazil, Russia, India and China < have a seat at the international high table, they will bring new stakes and rules of the game."

More recently, the U.S. edition of the conservative British weekly The Economist noted in its Jan. 1 issue that "America's influence has dwindled everywhere with the financial crisis and the rise of emerging powers."

The U.S. is still the dominating global hegemon, but a swiftly changing world situation is taking place as Washington's economic and political influence is declining, even as it remains the unmatched military superpower.

America suffers from low growth, extreme indebtedness, imperial overreach, and virtual political paralysis at home while spending a trillion dollars a year on wars of choice, maintaining the Pentagon military machine, and on various other "national security" projects.

The BRICS countries, by their very existence, their rapid economic growth and degree of independence from Washington, are contributing to the transformation of today's unipolar world order < still led exclusively by the United States < into a multipolar system where several countries and blocs will share global leadership. This is a major aim of BRICS, which recognizes it's a rocky, long road ahead because those who cling to empire are very difficult to dislodge before they swiftly disintegrate.

Looking down that road the next few decades, it is imperative to contemplate two potentially game-changing events that will heavily impact global politics, and the future of

world leadership.

1. The rate of petroleum extraction will soon reach the beginning of terminal decline, known as peak oil. This means more than half the world's petroleum reserves will have been depleted, leading inevitably to much higher oil prices and severe shortages. Under prevailing global conditions, this will greatly exacerbate tensions between major oil consuming countries leading to wars for energy resources

One resource war already has taken place < the Bush Administration's bungled invasion of Iraq, which possesses the world's fourth largest reserves of petroleum and tenth largest of natural gas. Since the U.S. with less than 5% of world population absorbs nearly 30% of the planet's crude oil, who's Washington's next target < Iran? Behind the U.S.-Israeli smokescreen of alleged Iranian aggression and supposed nefarious nuclear ambitions, reposes the world's third-largest proven oil reserves and second-largest natural gas reserves.

In 2009, the U.S. with a population of 300 million consumed 18.7 million barrels of oil day, the world's highest percentage. The second highest < the European Union with a population of 500 million < consumed 13.7 barrels a day. China with a population of 1.4 billion people was third, consuming 8.2 million barrels. BRICS, incidentally, includes the country with the world's first largest natural gas reserves, Russia (which is also eighth in petroleum reserves).

2. Equally dangerous, and perhaps much more so, is the probability of disastrous climate change in the next few decades, the initial effects of which have already arrived and are causing havoc with weather patterns. This situation will get much worse since the industrialized world, following slothful U.S. leadership, has done hardly anything to reduce its use of coal, oil and natural gas fossil fuels that are mainly responsible for climate change.

Another climate question is whether the capitalist system itself is capable of taking the steps necessary to dramatically reduce dependence on greenhouse gas emissions, as the socialists maintain. Eventually, under far better global leadership, some serious action must be taken, but the damage done until that point may not be rectified for centuries, if not longer. The question of better global leadership depends to a large degree on the outcome of the unipolar-multipolar debate.

Returning to the immediate problem, Washington not only opposes BRICS' preference for multipolarity, but is disgruntled by some of its political views. For instance, the group does not share America's antagonism toward Iran < President Barack Obama's whipping boy of the moment. BRICS also lacks enthusiasm for America's wars in Central Asia and the Middle East and maintains friendly relations with the oppressed Palestinians. The five nation emerging group further leans toward replacing the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency with a basket of currencies not preferential to any one country, as is the present system toward the U.S., or perhaps even a non-national global reserve legal tender.

For a small group <though it is symbolic of a large trend in world affairs < BRICS will have considerable clout this year as members of the UN Security Council occupying five of 15 seats < temporarily for Brazil (until the end of 2011), India and South Africa (ending after 2012), and permanently of course for China and Russia.

BRICS as an organization had a most unusual birthing. The group was brought into the

world, so to speak, without the knowledge of its members. The event took place in 2001 when an economist with the investment powerhouse Goldman Sachs created the BRIC acronym and identified the four countries together as a lucrative investment opportunity for the company's clients based on the enormity of their combined Gross Domestic Products and the probability of increasing growth.

Neither Brazil, Russia, India nor China played a role in this process, but they took note of their enhanced status as the BRICs and recognized that they shared many similarities in outlook as well as significant differences in their types of government and economic specialties.

The main similarity was that they were emerging societies with growing economies and influence, and they viewed Washington's unilateral world leadership as a temporary condition brought about by accident two decades earlier due to the implosion of the Soviet Union and most of the socialist world. They all seek a broader, more equitable world leadership arrangement within which they and others will play a role.

At the initiative of Russia's then-President Vladimir Putin in 2006, BRIC began what became regular meetings at the ministerial level that evolved a couple of years later into what is in effect a political organization. There are some differences and rivalries within its ranks that have been kept within bounds, such as between China and India (which is also close to the U.S.), and to a lesser extent between Russia and China. Brazil and South Africa are everyone's friends.

All five BRICS states < three of whom possess nuclear arsenals < maintain essentially cordial relations with the U.S. and try to avoid antagonizing the world superpower.

Despite productive working relations between the U.S. and Russia, Moscow justly perceives Washington to be an implicit threat that seeks to neutralize < if it cannot dominate < its now-reviving former Cold War opponent. The Russian leadership seems to view the U.S. as a strategically declining imperialist power, perhaps all the more dangerous for its predicament.

The Chinese government, while standing up for its rights when challenged by the U.S., is especially cautious because America's military power at this point is overwhelmingly superior to its own in all respects. It's trying to catch up in terms of defense, but it will take many years.

The Chinese Communist Party and government are primarily focused, as they have been for decades, on the creation of a modern, advanced, educated and 70% urban society of some 1.4 billion people. The national plan is to achieve this goal by 2030, based on economic growth (China is now the world's second largest economy, heading toward first within 15-35 years), political stability at home (which will soon require substantial social reforms to facilitate), and a foreign policy of nonintervention and friendship between nations.

The Beijing leadership is evidently uncertain whether the U.S. decline is temporary or long term and does not officially comment on such matters in line with its foreign policy perspective.

Just before the start of 3-day talks in Beijing regarding U.S.-China military relations, Defense Secretary Robert Gates told the New York Times Jan. 8 that the Obama Administration was

so concerned about Beijing's "military buildup in the Pacific" that the Pentagon was now increasing spending on such weapons as an advanced "long range nuclear-capable bomber aircraft," among other measures.

Responding to Gates' comment two days later at a joint press conference, Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Liang Guanglie said the U.S. "was overreacting" to an effort to modernize. "We can by no means call ourselves an advanced military force," Liang said. "The gap between us and that of advanced countries is at least two to three decades." This cannot be honestly disputed.

The newspaper also paraphrased Gates as saying during his visit that "if Chinese leaders considered the United States a declining power... they were wrong." He was then directly quoted: "My general line for those both at home and around the world who think the U.S. is in decline is that history's dustbins are filled with countries that underestimated the resilience of the United States.² Last August, it should be noted, two-thirds of the American people queried told an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll they think the U.S. is in a state of decline.

While Gates dwells upon Beijing's "buildup," the U.S. virtually encircles China with military bases, submarines, fleets at sea, spy satellites, long-range nuclear and conventional missiles, offensive weapons many years in advance of Chinese defenses, overwhelming airpower, plus alliances with Japan and South Korea in Beijing's vulnerable northeast, Taiwan, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and India. The U.S. spends over 10 times more on the military than China. It operates up to 1,000 large and small military bases around the world, while China has no foreign bases.

The Obama Administration is presently fishing in the troubled waters of the South China Sea, intervening in territorial disputes between China and neighboring countries, including Vietnam, much to Beijing's chagrin.

It is precisely this kind of "leadership" that BRICS and a number of emerging nations want to change.

The addition of South Africa was a deft political move that further enhances BRICS' power and status. The new member possesses Africa's largest economy, but as number 31 in global GDP economies it is far behind its new partners, nearly by 20-1 in China's case. It's also behind such other emerging countries as Turkey, Mexico, and South Korea, for example < but African credentials are important geopolitically, giving BRICS a four-continent breadth, influence and trade opportunities. China is South Africa's largest trading partner, and India wants to increase commercial ties to Africa.

Johannesburg sought BRIC membership over the last year, and as early as August the process of admission was underway, but now as a member it must take serious steps to substantially hasten its economic development to keep pace with other BRICS members. This will not be easy, but it is assumed the partners will help out.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared: "We believe that South Africa's accession will promote the development of BRICS and enhance cooperation between emerging economies." Russia's Foreign Ministry statement said South Africa "will not only increase the total economic weight of our association but also will help build up opportunities for mutually beneficial practical cooperation within BRICS."

Brazil's Foreign Ministry, in addition to the conventional welcoming, interjected a sharp political note into this economic club by suggesting that "on the international level" BRICS would work "to reform the financial system and increase democratization of global governance." The reference was to Washington's dominant authority over global finance and its unipolar leadership. This is bound to further irritate Washington.

India, like South Africa a former British colony and now a swiftly developing country, cannot conceivably oppose Johannesburg's admission for obvious reasons, but has so far remained publicly silent since the Dec. 24 announcement. India's unexpected quietude is of interest because last August Indian High Commissioner Virendra Gupta commented that "India of course remains extremely supportive of South Africa joining BRIC." The Indian foreign office is too sophisticated to have forgotten the expected routine welcoming.

Maintaining good ties with Washington, which is disturbed by South Africa's membership, is one of New Delhi's main considerations. The United States has been courting India for some time, offering various rewards < from help with its nuclear program (and silence about its violation of the nonproliferation treaty) to supporting India's quest for a future Security Council seat (which China opposes and Russia supports). The purpose is to attract India more deeply into Washington's orbit, undercutting Beijing's increasing global influence, and perhaps setting the two against each other.

Global Trends 2025 even envisioned possible "great power rivalries and increasing energy insecurity" between India and China that may lead to a serious confrontation "though great power war is averted." In the process, "United States power is greatly enhanced."

Regardless of BRICS and other emerging economies, President Obama's principal foreign policy objective since assuming office has been to reassert American global leadership after the Bush Administration's neoconservative imperialist wars and unilateralism weakened Washington's alliances and compromised its hegemony. This is what Obama was elected to do < not by rank-and-file Democrats cocooned in "change we can believe in," but by the representatives of great wealth, great corporations and great financial power.

The Obama Administration's first National Security Strategy report, released in May 2010, makes it clear that "Our national security strategy is... focused on renewing American leadership so that we can more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century." In discussing world economies, which correlate to global leadership in Washington's view, President Obama declared in his State of the Union Speech last year that "I do not accept second place for the United States of America."

As part of this policy the U.S. seeks to forestall the development of a genuine multipolar system by making limited concessions to the emerging nations that will leave Washington in charge for many years.

Washington's latest scheme, introduced a year and a half ago by Secretary of State Clinton, is the so-called, "multi-partner," not "multipolar," world < suggesting the Obama Administration's intention is to serve as "senior" partner of a global leadership "coalition of the willing," as it were, that will in effect strengthen Washington's singular role.

"We will lead," Clinton told the Council on Foreign Relations, "by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors and reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multipolar world and toward a multi-partner world. Now, we know this approach

is not a panacea. We will remain clear-eyed about our purpose. Not everybody in the world wishes us well or shares our values and interests. And some will actively seek to undermine our efforts. In those cases, our partnerships can become power coalitions to constrain or deter those negative actions.”

The U.S. also gives verbal support to an eventual expansion of the Security Council, and has cooperated in extending the powers of emerging countries within the Group of 20 leading industrialized economies, in the World Bank and IMF. In addition the State Department seeks one-to-one arrangements advantageous to certain countries to keep them well within the U.S. sphere of influence.

Washington intends to function as the principal world power for as long as it can. After all it is still an enormously wealthy, militarized state with powerful and obedient industrialized allies including the European Union countries (and NATO), the UK-Australia-Canada-New Zealand nexus, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and others.

However, the ongoing global diversification of economic and political resources toward the emerging countries appears to be leading inevitably to multipolarity. To quote “Global Trends 2025” once again:

“The unprecedented transfer of wealth roughly from West to East now under way will continue for the foreseeable future.... Growth projections for Brazil, Russia, India, and China indicate they will collectively match the original G-7’s share of global GDP by 2040-2050. China is poised to have more impact on the world over the next 20 years than any other country. If current trends persist, by 2025 China will have the world’s second largest economy and will be a leading military power.” Actually China became the second largest global economy last August, 15 years before 2025.

Under such conditions, how many newly empowered emerging countries will remain content simply to play follow-the-leader behind a faltering and militarist Uncle Sam?

The time of decision about the architecture of future world leadership draws nearer. At some point in 10 or 20 years a reluctant Washington may have to settle for a prominent position in a multipolar world construct.

But of course there remains another possibility.

Given the volatile global situation < peak oil, climate change, continued U.S. imperial wars, grave poverty that will increase as world population grows from 6.8 billion today to over 9 billion in 2050, and many emerging countries seeking a rightful share of world leadership < the United States may resort in time to global military aggression to sustain its dominant status, possibly even World War III.

Considering the U.S. political system’s decades-long move toward the right, the enormity of the Pentagon’s arsenal, the militarism in our society, and the ability of Washington and the corporate mass media to collaborate in “selling” wars to a misinformed public, this cannot be ruled out.

It is impossible to predict how all this will turn out. What is known is that the American people still have the power to make their own history. This not so much a question of voting < for whom, in this case? < but of taking action to galvanize the masses of people to oppose the political structure’s penchant for wars and global domination, for inexcusable foot-

dragging on climate change and indifference to gross economic inequality.

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