

A perspective on multilateralism, multipolarity and the case of BRICS¹

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1. Introduction

This conference addresses key fundamental issues pertaining to global governance and international development. It invites us to reflect on multilateralism and the role of emerging powers. It puts forward particularly the case of BRICS as an international mechanism of dialogue and cooperation that can be instrumental in the building of multipolarity and the strengthening of multilateralism. As I will argue, BRICS and other groups serve both its members' global interests and the broader objectives of multilateral cooperation, rendering it more effective, balanced and inclusive. Multilateralism has been developed by contributions of the United Nations (UN) and other international organisations. Groups such as the G7, BRICS and G20 have also provided significant inputs to this process. In that context emerging powers have matured as key players and enhanced their participation along advanced countries in development finance and sustainable development both within and outside the UN system. BRICS has made progress, for instance in the establishment of the New Development Bank, and can further contribute to attain the sustainable development goals globally. The commonality of BRICS countries on development objectives is strong, despite contrasting societal values, structural resources and capabilities, development trajectories and challenges. BRICS dialogue is critical for the G20 and multilateral fora, as it helps to reconcile views of emerging economies and across developed and developing countries. Like other groups, BRICS is instrumental in reshaping multilateralism, mainly the financial, sustainable development and economic cooperation architectures, in a more systematic manner.

2. Multilateralism

As discussed by Keohane (2006), multilateralism can be defined in different forms. According to Ruggie (1993), it would be defined as the practice or institution by which a group of three or more states coordinate national policies "on the basis of 'generalized' principles of conduct". Another definition of multilateralism that I use in this text has been inspired by the work of the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. This definition can be seen as the broadest possible extrapolation of Keohane's definition of multilateralism as "institutionalised collective action by an inclusively determined set of independent states". Along these lines, multilateralism would typically contemplate publicly known criteria for membership and rules of organization. Ideally, it would aim to be universal in its geographic scoping, as long as the referred criteria and rules could be set accordingly.

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In my view, the concept of multilateralism is not only an ideal construct, belonging to a Kantian view of international relations, but also a historical construct that, from a Hegelian perspective, has been forged from lessons and challenges of cooperation.³ Current concepts of multilateralism are especially (though not exclusively) informed by international developments since World War II.⁴ On the one side, it relies on the core purposes and principles, as those set in the United Nations⁵. On the other side, it is a process of institutional governance reforms so as to strengthen international cooperation that sovereign states have been collectively promoting in light of these fundamental purposes and principles. Consistent with that process, multilateralism can only be attained in a global scale over time through the full implementation of the working principles of inclusivity, plurality, dialogue and cooperation. Along this process, real interests of states play a role in shaping international power structures, stimulating different collective actions and promoting reforms of the institutional governances.

Multilateralism derives from states' collective will and actions in light of agreed principles that continuously interplay with national interests. Rather than reflecting the existence of an automatic mechanism, it is forged historically by heterogenous sovereign countries that agree on institutions and methods by which peace and security and international development are permanently sought, contingent on national interests and historical circumstances. The responsibility over the well functioning of the multilateral order, as well as its reforming process, relies not only on established rules, but also on the broad political commitment of states to identify themselves with values and objectives that have been inscribed in the institutions that conform this order.

In fact, the principles of multilateralism are reflected in institutions such as the UN, including the General Assembly (UNGA), the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO)⁶. However, international cooperation and the making of a multilateral order go much beyond a specific spectrum of international rules and institutions. Multilateralism is affected by a variety of factors accruing from the international political reality in which contrasting interests and asymmetric configurations of powers can prevail and can be exacerbated by differing capacities and heterogenous motivations of national states in contexts that might change either temporarily or permanently over time. The commitment of national states to multilateralism can be affected by unilateral measures and bilateral relations. Moreover, states can act collectively in the form of groups of countries. Besides regional groups or blocks, like the European Union, states can work as groups that configure multipolar settings. These multipolar settings can be partial or, at least indicatively seen, as representative of a (globally) multilateral order. While G20 could arguably be an example of the latter, the former cases are illustrated by the G7, BRICS and

³ Hegel's view of international relations in the Philosophy of Rights contrasts with Kant's in the Perpetual Peace for its emphasis on real and historical interests of countries that lead to a dialectic process of cooperation among them. See, for instance, Ramel (2022).

⁴ Edwards and all (2013) trace the origins of multilateralism as a concept in the 20th century in light of both US and European views.

⁵ The purposes and principles are defined in Articles 1 and 2 of the Charter of the United Nations.

⁶ Other seemingly multilateral organisations, like the International Criminal Court (ICC), do not include Security Council members or BRICS countries, most notably the United States, China and India.

other groups or, in a more institutionalised manner, by the UN Security Council and the boards of directors at the Bretton Woods institutions.

3. Groups as multipolar forces in the building of multilateralism

Historically, groups of countries have concerted in an informal or less institutionalised manner and brought to the international agenda common perspectives on peace and security, as well as on trade, finance and development. Traditionally the G77 has played an important role in trade, development and other matters. Other groups have been more specialized, such as the G24 at the Bretton Woods institutions, or the G4 (gathering Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) to promote the reform of the United Nations Security Council. At the WTO the Ottawa and Cairns Groups also illustrate commonalities that exist across developed and developing countries in support to, respectively, the reform of the organisation and liberalisation of global trade in agricultural goods.⁷

In a contrasting way, the G7, the BRICS, and the G20 have expressed themselves as groups covering increasingly broader scopes, with mandates that are not restricted to the governance of specific multilateral fora. Over the last decades, the creation of the G20 and of the BRICS, along the G7, have responded to changes in the international reality and the need to continuously account for multipolar considerations. In different ways, these groups reveal and support the intrinsic multipolarity that resides within multilateralism. They reflect real and aspirational interests to reform and potentially enhance the international governance and the multilateral system.

Threats to and objectives of financial and macroeconomic stability had led to the creation of the G7 and the G20. The establishment of the G7 was marked by the end of the US-led monetary system in the 1970s. It reflected a reform of the system, promoting the hegemonic role of a group of countries in a critical sector of the global economy. Decades later the creation of the G20 resulted from the need to incorporate emerging economies in the promotion of international financial stability in the final years of the 20th century. The 2008 financial crisis reinforced such a need and triggered not only the creation of BRICS but also the upgrading of G20 to a leader's level group. These events, coupled with China's accession to the WTO in 2001, eventually marked the inauguration of a transformative multipolar process of reshaping the international economic and financial governance.

In that context, BRICS and G7 have not only built concerts respectively between developed and developing countries, but also enlarged their substantive scopes. The G20 has evolved in a similar way. It has developed an encompassing agenda that resonates with various multilateral agendas at the UN, international financial institutions, WTO, WHO, FAO and many other fora. Within the G20, the greater influence of emerging economies and developing countries has been a necessity in face of a succession of threats and shocks of global scale since 2008, including financial crisis, trade and economic slowdown, climate change, and public health crisis. Moreover, it has become a critical feature of the broader reform of multilateral institutions so as to align more deeply the international agenda to development needs of emerging economies and developing countries.

⁷ It is worth noting that Brazil for instance is a member of all mentioned specialised Groups: G4, joint with Japan, India and Germany, as well as the G24, Ottawa and Cairns Groups.

4. BRICS and its multilateral role

All these groups reflect the mutual recognition among respective members of their leadership roles, assuming consequential responsibilities before the international community. Therefore, they are political platforms that advance interests and facilitate multilateral dialogue, while expressing multipolar forces. They are short of the same legitimacy of multilateral institutions, but can politically support their workings and consensus building, as well as the process of reform and strengthening of multilateralism. The G20 has established itself as the premier forum for economic and development cooperation. Operating in a similar space, BRICS gather essentially emerging economies from all areas of the globe - West and East, North and South.

By designing and expanding BRICS's actions internationally, the five members have further enhanced their mutual knowledge, promoted economic and development cooperation, projected common interests of emerging economies, and established mechanisms of dialogue and coordination that are pragmatic and flexible, as well as instrumental and constructive. They have proceeded in a manner that would not have been effective in a fully multilateral setting, but that facilitates their contributions to the multilateral process through better understanding and concerted positions. It is important to note that BRICS is not an alliance of like-minded countries, but rather a concert of nations that agree to strengthen the multilateral order on the basis of pluralism and common interests.

Actually, BRICS has systematically positioned itself as a group of countries that share common views on the process of reform and strengthening of the multilateralism. The latest 2022 Leaders Beijing Declaration strongly demonstrated this stance: *"We reiterate our commitment to multilateralism through upholding international law, including the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations as its indispensable cornerstone, and to the central role of the United Nations in an international system in which sovereign states cooperate to maintain peace and security, advance sustainable development, ensure the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and promoting cooperation based on the spirit of mutual respect, justice and equality."*⁸

Moreover, this commitment of BRICS has been extended to the reforms of the principal organs of the United Nations, with a view *"to instil new life in the discussions on reform of the UN Security Council and continue the work to revitalize the General Assembly and strengthen the Economic and Social Council"*⁹. The group has also emphasized at the highest level its *"support for an open, transparent, inclusive, non-discriminatory and rules-based multilateral trading system, as embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO)"*.¹⁰ Furthermore it advocates the full restoration of the dispute settlement mechanism and denounces the trade-distorted resort to protectionist and unilateral measures, which might

⁸ Extract of paragraph 5 of the 2022 Leaders Beijing Declaration.

⁹ Paragraph 7

¹⁰ Paragraph 11

be allegedly motivated by climate and environmental concerns, but that remain inconsistent with multilateral principles of the WTO and the UNFCCC.¹¹

Therefore, BRICS countries have managed to find consensus and exchange views on many topics from peace and security to finance and economy. They have pragmatically succeed in pushing forward the reform of global governance, even if the group remains a heterogeneous, exhibiting significantly contrasting views on societal and political values. Furthermore, they have focused on the political need to promote greater pluralism in international relations, while bringing development and developing countries to the center of the international agenda.

Within the G20 and various international organizations, BRICS countries and developing partners have rebalanced discussions in support of multilateralism, while improving respective governances and agendas in conformity with a diverse and multipolar reality. However, that process is more complex and will require further engagement from the G20 and beyond. The UN Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions still lack in representativeness. Despite significant contributions of BRICS and other groups of countries in these domains, further advancements will require strong involvement of key players, taking on board legitimate concerns of peace and security and sustainable development.

5. Sustainable development

On many accounts, the driving force of BRICS, which sends a strong signal of its political accomplishment, has been the group's increasing focus on development and therefore on the common challenges of developing economies. BRICS members have all endorsed the 2015 UN Resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", including its assessment pointing out that "sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development."

The focus on sustainable development has been central in BRICS in particular since the establishment of the New Development Bank in 2014. In fact, the NDB cannot be merely portrayed as a South-South development finance institution. Although it was founded by five emerging economies, which are set to remain its major shareholders, NDB aims to become a truly multilateral development bank, open to the membership of all United Nations members. Recently, the Bank has expanded with the joining of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Uruguay and Bangladesh. It is also in the process to start accession processes with other country shareholders.

Furthermore, NDB has sought to consolidate scope and method of operations in tune with the Sustainable Development Goals. Since its inception in 2015 the Bank has prioritised projects dedicated to sustainable infrastructures in areas such as water, sanitation and irrigation, transport infrastructures, urban mobility, renewable energy and social capital. Furthermore, its core principles show strong commitment to the principles of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, among which I would stress: reliance on national systems, demand-driven approaches, and country ownership of development policies and trajectories. These development financing principles conform with key multilateral principles

¹¹ See paragraphs 11 and 54 of the 2022 Declaration.

of plurality, inclusivity and cooperation, including those elaborated along “common but differentiated responsibilities” and the “nationally determined contributions” under the UNFCCC.¹²

The development of NDB as a multilateral development bank illustrates how BRICS can contribute in a tangible manner to reforming the international governance and strengthening of multilateralism, in particular in the intersection of development finance and sustainable development. In these areas BRICS countries have found deep commonalities and made significant progress. BRICS countries have been increasingly active in this field in the G20 and multilateral fora. They tend to support greater alignment of multilateral banks and international organizations with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Actually, this commitment is expected under SDG 17, which calls for international partnerships to fully achieve the Goals.

Certainly, much still needs to be done in that space, including under the leadership of the G20, so as to mobilize further resources and integrate the three main pillars of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental - in the responses to global challenges, including with respect to climate and energy transition. Over the last years the G20 has intensified discussions and resolutions to mobilize resources to achieve the SDGs.¹³ In this respect, G20 is benefiting from the sequence of developing countries leading it. After Indonesia in 2022, three BRICS members will chair the G20 in succession: India in 2023, Brazil in 2024 and South Africa in 2025. The 2023 SDG Summit to be convened by the UN Secretary-General may also be an opportunity to raise awareness at the highest political level in this field. In fact, as we pass the mid-point between the adoption of the SDG Agenda in 2015 and the target year of 2030, BRICS and other G20 members should intensify work to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs with a sense of priority in multilateral fora and banks.

6. Final comments

The respect of plurality and attainment of consensus in the BRICS and the G20 have been key features of the emerging multilateral order. My country Brazil shares common development objectives and challenges with other BRICS members. It has actively promoted the reform of multilateral institutions with greater participation of developing countries. It also shares fundamental values and principles with many other G20 countries and regional partners.

In particular, Brazil and other Latin American countries have been increasingly participating in the work of the OECD. This is another multilateral or plurilateral context in which countries that express attachment to principles of democracy and human rights, as well as transparency and accountability, can further project interests and cooperate in an evidence-based manner, promoting analytical and public policy dialogue on economic, development and related affairs. As the OECD expands its membership and promotes its cooperation with

¹² These principles are reflected in Articles 2 and 3, 4, 7, 9, 10 11 and 13 of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

¹³ The 2022 G20 Leaders Declaration adopted in Bali emphasises the mobilisation of resources to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

partners, including other BRICS countries, the Organisation's empirical and peer-review methods can be enriched on a plural basis and further disseminated.

As emerging powers and major developing economies, BRICS countries can be more attuned to the reality and needs of other developing countries. Their increasing participation in the G20 and other fora has been a constructive factor in the reshaping of multilateralism. Multilateral discussions in the UN, the OECD, international financial institutions and other fora can particularly benefit from a more diverse and multipolar setting. This is the way forward for the remigration of multilateralism, with greater degrees of realism, representation and legitimacy.

Many of the progress and advancements attained in the G20 were a direct result of conciliatory efforts between developed and developing countries, with BRICS members and other emerging economies at the forefront. Over the last 12 months, across the G20 and many multilateral fora, these efforts have been considerable to address not only economic and development agenda but also geopolitical tensions and their effects in this agenda. Despite conflicting views between members, it is crucial to keep the work of BRICS and G20 alive and productive in the sphere of economic and development cooperation.

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