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The BRICS and global governance: China’s contradictory role

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**ABSTRACT**

The impact of rising powers generally and the BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - in particular on the existing global order has become controversial and contested. Donald Trump's nationalist foreign policy agenda has raised questions about the BRICS willingness and capacity to provide leadership in place on an American administration that is increasingly inward looking. As a result, the rise of BRICS poses potential normative and structural challenges to the existing liberal international order. Given its geoeconomic significance, China also poses a potential problem for the other BRICS, as well as the governance of the existing order more generally. Consequently, we argue that it will be difficult for the BRICS to maintain a unified position amongst themselves, let alone play a constructive role in preserving the foundations of global governance.

**INTRODUCTION**

Some ideas seem to capture the zeitgeist. ‘Globalisation,’ for example, barely merited a mention in the early 1980s, but by the 1990s it was inescapable. Even though its meaning was contested, globalisation seemed a useful shorthand for a series of developments that were synonymous with the post-Cold War order. The BRICS, a synonym for Brazil, Russia, India and China (later joined by South Africa), briefly seemed as if it would have an even more dramatic impact on a discourse that was attempting to make sense of a world in flux. Significantly, it was a world in which so-called rising powers looked certain to play a larger part. Consequently, when Jim O’Neil coined the term BRICS in 2001, it immediately caught on as it seemed to identify both a significant development in the international system and – equally importantly – some of the principal actors that were going to drive that development.

Things look rather different now. The fortunes and impact of the BRICS individually and collectively have not lived up to their admirers’ expectations. Not only have the BRICS experienced varying degrees of economic decline and/or difficulty, but their capacity to act collectively has also been modest, to say the least. Ironically, some of the most important waves of change that the BRICS looked poised to surf to geopolitical and geoeconomic greatness have proved as disruptive as they were enabling. Most significantly of all, perhaps, the US under the unpredictable, nationalistic and entirely instrumental leadership of Donald Trump looks
set to add another, altogether unexpected, roadblock to the seamless ascent that many had predicted for the BRICS. Indeed, the very idea of effective global governance is being fundamentally undermined by the actions of an American administration that seems intent on pursuing national goals, rather than addressing transnational collective action problems.\(^1\)

The quintessential example of this possibility is the US withdrawal from the Paris accord on climate change. Significantly, China continues to support the Paris agreement and has criticised the US for its leadership failures in this context.\(^2\) Indeed, in one of the more remarkable developments in recent international relations practice, China has begun to position itself as a status quo power intent on preserving and consolidating the institutional foundations of the established international order that the US did so much to create.\(^3\) International relations theory has been rather slower to catch up with this rapidly changing picture. While there is a good deal of scepticism about China's willingness or ability to play the sort of role that the US has in the past,\(^4\) it is important that we consider the possible practical and conceptual implications of China's rapidly evolving international role. In particular, it is illuminating to consider the largely overlooked impact on some of China's supposedly closest friends amongst the BRICS.

The question now is whether the foundations that supposedly underpinned the BRICS will prove sufficiently robust to maintain an edifice of cooperation and coherence in the face of growing international turbulence and China's increased importance as a political, economic and strategic actor. At a time when the very stability of the old order is in question, it is worth asking whether the BRICS can maintain a unified position amongst themselves, let alone play a constructive role in preserving the foundations of 'global governance', an idea that is looking increasingly fragile in a world characterised by greater disorder. To judge by the evidence so far, the answer is: probably not.

This claim is substantiated and explored in the following ways. First, we revisit the contest notion of global governance and suggest that the BRICS pose a normative and structural challenge, as they are not easily accommodated within what is still a predominantly liberal world view and discourse. This possibility is explored in more detail in the second part of the paper. We examine the role of China in particular, highlighting both its importance and its illiberal, nationally driven priorities that raise problems for the other BRICS, as well as the governance of the existing order more generally.

**Global governance**

Before we can decide whether China in particular and the BRICS more generally are capable of playing a constructive role in maintaining extant practices of global governance and international cooperation, it is worth briefly reminding ourselves of what global governance is supposed to be – at least as an ideal type. According to one of the more astute observers of global governance it is:

> the combination of informal and formal values, rules, norms, procedures, practices, policies, and organizations of various types that often provides a surprising and desirable degree of global order, stability, and predictability.\(^5\)

Although this is a useful starting point for thinking about the contemporary international order, two initial points are worth emphasising. First, there has always been a good deal of scepticism – and not just among realists – about the possibility of realising something approximating to global governance. Indeed, for some observers it is the pursuit of global governance
itself that is partly to blame for what Mazower calls the ‘loss of faith’ in international institutions. Schweller, for example, argues that ‘far from creating more order and predictability, this explosion of so-called global governance institutions has increased the chaos, randomness, fragmentation, ambiguity and impenetrable complexity of international politics’.

Whatever the merits of such claims, the second point to emphasise is that what currently passes for global governance was essentially created under the auspices of American hegemony in the aftermath of the Second World War. Significantly, it was an order that promoted a form of liberal, free market-oriented economic activity that would ultimately colonise most of the world, and which was designed to encourage greater openness and economic integration. To facilitate and regulate greater economic integration, a number of new intergovernmental organisations were established to help manage the new international order. The so-called Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (later to be replaced by the World Trade Organization), represented both a decisive step on the road to global governance and a key part of American hegemony.

However, it is important to recognise that this American-led international order was created in unique historical circumstances. Not only was global capitalism still in a state of general crisis in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, but the Soviet Union posed a very real ideological and material challenge to US dominance. The world is very different now, and the geopolitical drivers of international competition are different, too. It is no longer a case of whether states are capitalist or ‘communist’, but the sort of capitalist economy and domestic governance practices states adopt. While China and the BRICS may have different ideas about the best ways of running an economy and the appropriate role of the state, they are not looking to completely overturn the existing order, even if it poses particular challenges to countries where the state remains a powerful and central actor domestically.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, one area in which the BRICS are looking to change the interventionist impulses of the extant, liberal international order, however, is in protecting national sovereignty. It is no coincidence that China’s leaders still refer to the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’; originally developed by Zhou Enlai and Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954, as the foundation of a distinctive alternative to the prevailing international order. Given that the Trump administration is equally preoccupied with protecting national sovereignty, the chances of such ideas being taken seriously and even factored into international diplomacy can only increase. What is less clear is whether national sovereignty is compatible with a world in which global forces and new actors are undermining the traditional capacities and powers of individual states, no matter how powerful they may be.

The capacity to shape the ruling ideas and regulatory architecture, the ability to assert influence through nominally independent inter-governmental agencies like the IMF, and the possibility that private sector organisations may continue to reflect the perspectives of businesses from specific countries, all entrench the interests of particular countries and groups. Observers from a variety of theoretical perspectives have suggested that the structural power and influence of business not only transcends national borders, but also redefines social relations within the notionally domestic sphere in the process. If either of these claims was unambiguously accurate this would have major consequences for the way global governance might be expected to evolve, as it came to reflect a more ubiquitous set of ideas and interests favoured by international business. The reality is far more complex, however, and this has significant potential implications for both China and the other BRICS.
On the one hand, as the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature has made clear, distinctive national patterns of economic organisation – especially in the area of state-business relationships – persist even in an era of supposed globalisation. This is not to suggest that the BRICS have not been significantly affected by their incorporation into an increasingly integrated international political economy, but is also evident that national institutions and interests are surprisingly durable and distinctive. On the other hand, therefore, the way individual states deal with ‘their’ business sector remains a powerful determinant of, and constraint on, the way they engage with international institutions. Not only are there powerful and enduring patterns of interlocking economic and political interests in all of the BRICS states, which make them potentially nervous about externally generated reform agendas no matter what their origins may be, but the actors that constitute such relationships also have potential reasons to preserve the status quo.

The corruption problems that have recently plagued the BRICS are perhaps the most obvious manifestation of these underlying drivers of national policy. There are, however, other, more mundane, explanations of the constraining impact of the domestic political and economic arena. In China’s case, for example, the continuing economic and political importance of state-owned enterprises places a fundamental constraint on possible economic policy settings and, by extension, the Chinese government’s relationship with key bilateral partners such as the US. It also raises difficult questions about China’s ability or willingness to play the sort of role that the US has – notionally, at least – in providing vital collective goods. In reality, of course, the US frequently violated the principles it rhetorically espoused, even before the advent of Donald Trump and his nationalistic policy agenda. As Daniel Drezner has pointed out, ‘great powers remain the most important actors in developing and enforcing the rules of the global economy’, but their preferences about what those rules will look like ‘have their origins in the domestic political economy’.22

The possibility that China’s leaders might be driven primarily by national priorities, rather than by a sense of altruism or concern with some notional collective good should come as no surprise. After all, China’s policymakers are overwhelmingly ‘realists’ in their approach to international relations. Recently, however, this innate nationalism has been reinforced by a state that has become more powerful and centralised under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Indeed, the Chinese government may have painted itself into a policy corner in its desire to reassert China’s former pre-eminence and its concomitant place in the East Asian region. It is not necessary to think that China’s territorial claims are legitimate to recognise their constraining impact and importance in and on Chinese foreign policy. Under such circumstances even if China comes to play a larger part in global governance it may well be governance with distinctively Chinese preferences that reflect perceived Chinese interests, especially as far as the role of the state is concerned.

Much the same might be said about the other BRICS, of course, as they chafe under the constraints of the current international order and seek to make it more amenable to their own views and priorities. Unlike China, however, even the most powerful of them have significantly less capacity than China to shape the institutions of global governance that will help determine how states behave. Equally importantly, it is far from clear whether China’s views and preferences will ultimately prove any more palatable and productive for the other BRICS than the current international order does. It is important to remember that all the BRICS, including China, have risen to prominence under the auspices of American hegemony. The key contradiction for the BRICS in general, therefore, is that they are all still reliant on
aspects of the existing system, which is why some American observers believe the liberal order created under American hegemony will endure. To develop a clearer picture of the way these contradictions may play themselves out, we need to look at the way the BRICS have acted with the overall framework of global governance.

The BRICS in global governance

It is important to recognise that the rise of the BRICS is, for many observers, emblematic of a disruptive force within, if not a conscious challenge to, the extant international order we associate with global governance. Ian Bremmer, for example, despite being highly sceptical about the BRICS capacity to develop a coherent, collective position within the prevailing order, recognises their capacity to contest existing practices and norms, further undermining an increasingly fragile system. Bremmer’s conclusion is that growing doubts about the legitimacy and efficacy of the international institutions associated with ‘Western’ powers generally, and the US in particular, are leading to a growing interest in regional agreements: ‘This is a world where regional leaders provide some public goods within their respective spheres of influence, while increasingly self-confidence regional heavyweights largely ignore major multinational institutions’.

Even before the BRICS became a part of the language of international diplomacy, it was clear that the spread of liberal values, especially as they applied to democratic reform, was far from assured. Such trends have gathered pace of late and are reflective of a growing crisis of confidence about the role of ‘the West’; and its capacity to solve its own problems, let alone anyone else’s. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the contemporary international system has been the growing prominence of authoritarian leadership. The increased power and centrality of BRICS ‘strongman’ leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi and Jacob Zuma is far from unique. On the contrary, Turkey’s Erdogan and Duterte from the Philippines are powerful reminders that authoritarianism is on the rise.

The significance of this trend is twofold. First, it demonstrates that there is nothing inevitable about the triumph of Western values, liberalism or democracy. Second, the idea that liberal values will be embedded as part of a process of global governance is far from assured, raising doubts about the possible basis for transnational cooperation in the future. At a time when major questions are being asked about the efficacy, legitimacy and durability of the multilateral institutions that are such an important part of global governance, this a potentially major problem. Indeed, it would be a problem at any time; it is especially damaging following the election of an American president that seemingly has little enthusiasm for, or even understanding of, the role played by such institutions as part of America’s long-term international dominance and influence. The question is, what impact might the rise of the BRICS have on this rapidly evolving international order?

The (lack of a) BRICS blueprint

Even critics of the Washington consensus would have to concede that if nothing else, the concept and its implicit agenda had enormous ‘brand recognition’. Significantly, when John Williamson coined the term, he saw himself as simply giving expression to the ‘common core of wisdom embraced by all serious economists’. In other words, Williamson saw many of
the principles embedded in this idea about the role of the state, tax policy, attitudes toward investment and the like, as uncontroversial, mainstream and, from an orthodox economic standpoint, technically ‘correct’ responses to ubiquitous challenges of economic development and public policy. What made this paradigm so influential, however, was not simply the possibility that its proposed solutions to economic problems were unambiguously accurate, but that its impact was reinforced by powerful inter-governmental organisations with political leverage.36 As Babb points out, a process of ‘institutional isomorphism’ occurred that was facilitated because ‘the roles of transnational norms and transnational power were deeply intertwined … IFI [international financial institutions] conditionality shifted national paradigms not directly, by forcing compliance, but indirectly, by benefiting some political actors over others in national political contests’:37

One of the most frequent observations about the BRICS is that they have neither a coherent joint position on the nature or the shortcomings of the current international system, nor an alternative model or vision of an alternative order.38 Given the arbitrary and rather accidental nature of the grouping itself, this is not surprising. It is, however, a potentially major obstacle to possible future collaboration and cooperation. Indeed, it raises fundamental questions about what precisely the purpose of the BRICS is, other than not being a compliant part of the extant order. To be sure, there have been potentially significant initiatives, such as the creation of the BRICS Development Bank.39 However, at this stage, this new institution has not achieved much.40 Indeed, it is significant that its biggest player – China – has chosen to develop a rival institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), over which it expects to have a more decisive and high profile influence.41

The nearest the BRICS have come to developing an alternative model or perspective has been the emergence of what some have called the Beijing consensus (BC). 42 Its evolution and status tells us much about the constraints facing China in particular and the BRICS more generally. The first point to make about the BC is that the Chinese government and analysts have been strikingly reluctant to embrace the concept.43 In part, perhaps, this may reflect that it is arguably little more than a synonym for pragmatism and doing what works, rather than what is ideologically ordained, as has been the case with the Washington Consensus. Chinese analysts also point to the gap between rhetoric and reality. Wang Yuanlong, for example, argues that the BC does not reflect the essential features of China’s development model.44 Likewise, Yao Yang points to the possible unsustainability of China’s authoritarian growth model.45 Nie Huihua goes further and argues that the BC ‘does not exist’. On the contrary, Nie claims that, ‘progress will be made if we learn from the West; if not, we will be left behind’.46

Sceptics have also pointed out that the BC is notably lacking in specific, transferable policy recommendations,47 despite some observers believing that it represents a blueprint for an alternative Chinese-dominated world order.48 Indeed, Hasmath argues that the BC ‘should be seen as a statement of intent … towards an ultra-pragmatic view of policy’.49 A more fundamental reason for China’s ambivalence toward this idea, though, may be found in the unwillingness of its policymakers to embrace the supposed responsibilities of global leadership.50 Until recently, at least, there has been a marked reluctance on the part of China’s policymakers to provide the sorts of collective goods that are frequently thought to be part of the cost of leadership; concerns about liberalising the domestic economy, privatisation and especially allowing the value of the yuan to be determined by market forces are emblematic of these concerns.52 Precisely because of dissatisfaction with the existing growth model,
Chinese leaders have been looking for ways to make economic adjustments. According to the Chinese media, Xi Jinping and his leadership team are looking at the so-called Singapore Model and trying to learn from Singapore's combination of economic liberalism with a one-party system. It is also not difficult to find similarities between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s restoration of Confucian values and the sorts of policies adopted in Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew.

It is also worth noting that the New Delhi Consensus is often considered by many Chinese analysts as a competitor of BC, a reminder of the potentially competing interests and perspectives of rising powers, a point to which we shall return.

There are signs that China under Xi Jinping may, indeed, be overcoming at least some of this ambivalence and beginning to assume an international role in keeping with the country's material status. The development of the One Belt, One Road initiatives – now called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – and the associated AIIB, and even China's assertive strategic policy, are the most noteworthy expressions of this possibility. China's rise has also fuelled an important domestic debate about whether Deng Xiaoping's 'keeping a low profile and never become a leader' principle is outdated. As a result it is argued that Chinese grand strategy is shifting towards a policy of 'striving for achievement', suggesting that China under Xi's leadership is now willing to, and capable of, taking on global responsibility. To become a respectful great power has always been a goal of China's foreign policy since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. The CCP's propaganda on 'great power diplomacy' under Xi Jinping often harks back to the diplomacy under the then Premier Zhou Enlai who asserted China's role as a leader at different global stages in 1950s (most notably at Bandung).

**Structural problems within BRICS?**

But even if such developments really do presage a major long-term change in China's overall significance in the international order, it is important to recognise that this is something that China is working toward on its own, rather than as part of an integrated, coordinated effort on the part of the BRICS.

China and other BRICS countries, for example, share similar positions regarding the role of developing countries in combating climate change and committing to a greater use of renewable energy. Significantly, however, China's position on climate change is overwhelmingly driven by domestic political pressures and concerns, not pro-environmental beliefs or because of the possible responsibilities that might flow from global leadership. Put simply, environmental policy is primarily about maintaining the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist party by dealing with domestic grievances and possible social unrest. There is also a belief that largescale investment in renewable energy will boost economic growth, help to restructure the domestic economy and entrench China's leadership in new technologies. As economic growth is considered as a key pillar of the CCP's legitimacy, environmental policy, like other policies, is ultimately about retaining power and legitimacy in a non-democratic polity.

China is already the most significant actor within the BRICS. In the absence of a domestic economic or political crisis, recent initiatives – whatever their rationale – look likely to reinforce this dominance. Indeed, there is a very real possibility that some of China's initiatives will entrench China's developing regional hegemony at the expense of the other BRICS such as Russia and India. Despite the promising economic prospects offered by the project, China's BRI has led to concerns in Moscow over its influence in Russia's backyard Central Asia.
Xi’s BRI and Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union aim to promote a vision of Central Asian economy that privileges their own country’s interests at their core. The overlapping and potentially competing nature of these projects highlight the potential incompatibility of Chinese and Russian visions for the region.

If Russia’s position is ambiguous, one of the other BRICS country’s position is more straightforwardly problematic. India openly boycotted Beijing’s Belt and Road Summit as, according to Indian Ministry of External Affairs, India cannot ‘accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity’. Here, India’s official statement explicitly points to its concerns over security implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is a flagship project of BRI, referring to a collection of on-going infrastructure projects worth US$62 billion within Pakistan. India’s concerns over the relevant infrastructure projects are not new, as some of the projects were planned years before the BRI was announced but have now come to fruition under the rubric of BRI. India’s geopolitical rival Pakistan also considers China’s BRI as a potential ‘game changer’ and ‘transformer’ of its economy, and one that might develop to India’s disadvantage.

The underlying tensions between the region’s two great powers was highlighted during the recent direct confrontation between China and India over unresolved territorial claims. In June 2017, India sent its troops and equipment to block China’s construction of a border road through a plateau known as Doklam in India and Donglang in China. This plateau lies in the junction among China, India and Bhutan, which is a disputed area between Bhutan and China. As a third party of this territorial dispute and an ally of Bhutan, India is concerned that China’s extension of the border road presents a security threat as it may allow greater access to Chinese troops over the ‘chicken’s neck’ – a strategically narrow corridor linking mainland India and its remote north-eastern states. India’s actions caused outrage in China, marking one of the worst confrontations between these two leading BRICS in the past 30 years. The underlying reality is that many in China – including senior members of the government – regard India with condescension as a far less significant international actor than China itself.

The Chinese government has repeatedly warned of the potential for military escalation and argued that the only peaceful solution is that India ‘withdrew its troops without any condition’. This confrontation has generated intense discussion within Chinese media and policy analysts about possible military solutions to end the stand-off. Growing nationalistic sentiments in China appear to be pushing the government to take a more assertive position than Beijing might want to take in ‘normal’ circumstances. According to one article in the nationalist Chinese official newspaper, Global Times, ‘People’s Liberalisation Army has made sufficient preparation to cope with military struggle with India. Once the war starts, the Army will give India a painful lesson.’ Other state medias have also repeatedly drawn attention to India’s defeat in the 1962 India–China armed conflict. Archival material was widely disseminated within China’s closely monitored social and state media. This pattern of media control in support of state projects – be they domestic or international – is well established and an important part of the cultivation of legitimacy. It inevitably circumscribes how China can act internationally as a consequence.

Balancing possible international obligations with domestic political imperatives is a growing problem for China’s increasingly assertive leadership. At the time of border standoff, Beijing was about to have China’s once-in-five years’ leadership transition in late 2017. Disputes with India could intensify what is already a potential period of crisis and instability.
to power transition of the authoritarian regime. The reality is that China is undergoing a major period of domestic political transition and this will inevitably take priority over external relationships. This is why China had to allow nationalistic sentiments against India spread on social and official media at the time. It is not simply notional BRICS solidarity that is likely to be tested by China’s current domestic difficulties, however. Greater self-assertion on China’s part is likely will also undermine the carefully constructed discourse about the nature and possible benefits of China’s ‘peaceful rise’. The concerns of predominantly Western critics about China’s growing military power will be given further credence. In this context, China’s relationship with fellow BRICS India may be a second order issue – something that will further undermine both the significance of the BRICS and the possibility that they may develop coherent, collective positions of key international issues.

This conflict is neither the first nor the last border dispute between China and India, but it demonstrates the implacable nature of path-dependent, potentially irreconcilable national interests. After independence, India claimed that it has the legitimate rights to the territory of British colony, including a disputed area that China considers as a part of Tibet – a highly sensitive issue in China’s domestic and foreign policy at the best of times. Xi Jinping’s first visit to India in 2014 made little progress in resolving these problems. China considers Tibet to be a core interest and is highly sensitive about Indian interference in a domestic problem. The fact that India hosts the Tibetan government in exile and gives support to the Dalai Lama remains a constant source of irritation within China. According to an article in *Global Times*, for example, India’s play of Tibet card is ‘very clumsy and rude’. It is notable that India is considered as a key part in the US’ ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy under Trump in order to contain China’s rise and counter its BRI. Although it is too early to predict its future development, the geopolitical competing nature between rising India and China is the obvious basis to deliver this ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy.

The point to emphasise is that both India and China are re-emerging rising powers with potentially conflicting interests that are driven by powerful domestic, nationalistic forces. When combined with their territorial disputes, these structurally embedded problems can easily trump the desire to cooperate in global affairs within the BRICS framework. This is not to deny the ability and benefits of the BRICS to provide global leadership in areas such as international development cooperation and technical assistance to low-income countries. Nonetheless, these cooperative initiatives are a secondary concern when compared to conflicting interests over sovereignty and geopolitical competition among the BRICS.

**Illiberalism and global governance**

It is not simply in the traditional areas of territorially-based great power rivalries that the inherent tensions within the BRICS and the limits to their capacity to act collectively are evident. Global cyber governance and China’s push for the so-called ‘Internet Sovereignty’ is another, very contemporary, example of how new issues can clash with older priorities and ambitions. Significantly, even in one of the areas that is synonymous with freedom of expression and non-state-based social mobilisation, China’s government is pioneering new forms of control and monitoring. The existing global cyber order has been widely criticised as US-centric, in which the US exploits its technical and institutional advantages to advance its own national interests. Through its National Security Agency’s PRISM clandestine surveillance programme, for example, the US is collecting personal and commercial data from...
Internet Giants such as Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Apple and Microsoft. Not only US geopolitical competitors Russia and China but also ally European member states are targeted in the surveillance programme.

In this context, China has made increased efforts to promote the concept of ‘Internet sovereignty’ as an alternative to the existing cyber norms. Contrary to the US/Western position that cyber space is an ‘open’ global commons beyond the sovereignty of any state, China’s Internet sovereignty points to a more traditional state-centric, sovereignty-oriented regime. In this formulation, states have legitimate sovereignty rights in cyber space and they can and should implement nationally-grounded laws to deal with problems such as transnational cybercrime. This conventional extrapolation of territorial rights and obligations into virtual cyber space is supported by Russia, Brazil and South Africa. Since 2014, China’s ‘World Internet Conference’ in Wuzhen has served as a platform for China to contest the existing US cyber order and promote its own cyber norms. Before that, China worked with Russia and other Central Asian countries through its Shanghai Cooperation Organizations in this area to put forward new norms and rules in global cyber governance. However, their various attempts, such as the International Code of Conduct for Information Security, met wide resistance in the United Nations.

While cybercrimes and cyber security is highlighted as key reasons to support the reform over existing cyber order, the concern over free flow of information is perhaps a principal motivation for the authoritarian China and Russia. The rise of digital technologies, Internet in particular, have presented enormous challenges for authoritarian regimes. The development of those technologies has made it more difficult to block free flow of information, which exposes its citizens to Western liberal democratic values. The concept of Internet sovereignty provides a legitimate cover for autocracy to have greater control over cyberspace and repress domestic free access to foreign information. In the Chinese case, the Golden Shield Project, also known as the Great Firewall of China, is an example. It allows the Chinese authoritarian regime to conduct Internet censorship and domestic surveillance.

Russia has also made use of this position to conduct its domestic censorship and prevent ‘foreign forces’ threatening national security. Here, ironically, ‘foreign forces’ also include China. In May 2017, Russia blocked China’s WeChat – a powerful and popular message service application operated by China’s internet giant Tencent – as it failed to comply Russia’s internet regulations and policies. This decision was made by Russian communications watchdog Roskomnadzor on 5 May 2017 – only a couple of weeks before Putin’s visit to China. This decision immediately hit the headlines within China. Although WeChat was unblocked in Russia a few days later, this had no doubt affected the positive atmosphere of pre-Putin’s visit. Similarly, Iran, another support of China’s Internet sovereignty, also banned WeChat in 2013. In this regard, they are trying to make domestic cyberspace exclusively to its own regime not any other authoritarian fellows let alone democracies like the US.

The point to make here is even if some of the BRICS are pushing for similar reforms in the prevailing global order, they are not necessarily a result of the collective efforts or thinking of the BRICS, but of individual national interests. The central security referent in this regard is the domestic security of authoritarian regimes. In order to put the norm of ‘internet sovereignty’ into practice, the Chinese scholarly and policy community have been instrumental in reinforcing the state’s control of cyberspace. Thus, the consequence of policy around internet sovereignty is to reinforce state authority and security. China’s promotion of state sovereignty in cyberspace is a fundamental challenge to some of the central precepts of
global governance and globalisation more generally. In this regard, at least, the inability of the BRICS to act in concert may not be an obstacle to the development of policies they can all live with.

Modest as such outcomes may be, they are welcome, for, as Shaun Breslin points out, the fundamental problem as far as BRICS are concerned is that while the BRICS states might agree on what they don’t like and what they are dissatisfied with, there doesn’t seem to be a shared vision of what a radically different world order might look like. From the perspective of actors reliant on still nascent forms of global governance, this represents a fundamental obstacle to future transnational cooperation: the BRICS increasingly have the power and capacity to undermine extant forms of broadly liberal governance but, thus far, have demonstrated little ability, or even interest, in developing a real alternative to the prevailing order. The consequence may be what Robert Wade describes as ‘multipolarity without multilateralism’. In other words, we may be beginning to see a redistribution of power within the international system, but it may be one that makes collective action via multilateral institutions increasingly difficult. It is a world in which neither the interests of the US nor its potential, increasingly powerful, rivals can be certain of advancing their interests.

Concluding remarks

Global governance sounds like an attractive idea. States and other actors with an international orientation of presence benefit from the existence of a predictable, rule-governed order in which necessary, durable relationships that transcend national borders can be developed. The Trump administration’s apparent willingness to upend the global trade regime and resort to an old-fashioned and potentially damaging protectionism and nationalism is but one of the examples of a contemporary disdain for some of the key parts of what passes for global governance. Indeed, the entire largely liberal notion of ‘globalisation’ as a positive force in world affairs has been profoundly undermined as rising inequality and unhappiness with the prevailing order sparks a series of populist movements across the world.

Rather bizarrely, many are now looking to authoritarian China, a country with no history of political or even economic liberalism, to champion values and practices that were formerly seen as the preserve of the US. It remains to be seen whether China is capable or willing to play this sort of role in anything other than a rhetorical fashion; there would seem to be absolutely no chance of the BRICS as a whole doing so. On the contrary, the capacity of the BRICS to play a constructive role in underpinning the provision of collective goods looks more remote than ever as they feel the effects of growing domestic problems that have not spared even China and India. The BRICS may not be directly responsible for the current international disorder, but they are likely to feel its effects as acutely as anyone. Coupled with a declining capacity and/or willingness on the part of the US to play a role as systemic stabiliser, however, the prospects for effective global governance look more remote than ever.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes on Contributors

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Notes

2. Clark, “China warns Trump.”
4. Beeson, “Can China Lead?”
5. Weiss, Global Governance, 32.
7. Schweller, “Ennui Becomes Us,” 34.
8. Agnew, Hegemony.
10. The five Principles are: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference; equality and cooperation; peaceful co-existence; Panda, “Reflecting on China’s.”
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17. Peck and Zhang, “A Variety of Capitalism.”
18. Kurlantzick, State Capitalism; Musacchio and Lazzarini, Reinventing State Capitalism.
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24. Lampton, “Xi Jinping.”
27. Pant, “The BRICS Fallacy.”
30. Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*.
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40. Wu, “Never Mind the Bumpy Start.”
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42. Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*.
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