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*\* The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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## Three Ways to Explore the BRICS (Possible) Impact on the Future Global Order

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

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*In a moment of great global uncertainty, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are increasing their standing worldwide. Despite several areas that still undermine their credibility on the world stage and which make them appear to seem irrelevant as a group in the view of some scholars, we try to analyze and evaluate if they are really accountable as a group and what impact they could have on global governance and, in general, on the global order. We depart from previous research accomplishments and, following certain classical theories of International Relations such as those of Critical and Dependence, we consider three aspects of the BRICS growth that could influence the current international framework: 1) the emergence of institutions outside the Bretton Woods system; 2) an interest in improving their “soft power” (for example, climate change may play a decisive role here); 3) the growth of their presence in different parts of the world which have so far experienced a subordinated or marginal role. The paper considers both the limitations of and the potential for BRICS countries in the reshaping of the international framework. Moreover, we provide some interpretations to the current situation, especially in light of the prospective impact that COVID-19 may have on these three fields.*

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### Introduction

This article aims to propose an analysis of what form the influence of the BRICS will have on global governance (GG) in the future and, in general, on the global order. Continuing on from previous research conducted on the BRICS influence on the GG system (Petrone, 2017 and 2019), we further analyze the achievements and the potential impacts these countries may have on the international framework. Over the last few years, at an international level, these countries have been increasing their importance, so there is a great interest in what impact their *modus operandi* will have. At the same time, we wonder what consequences the current COVID-19 pandemic will have on the BRICS ambitions in increasing their influence.

In some cases, the BRICS are seen as a bloc which will not have much influence and whose limitations will soon become obvious (Brutsch and Papa, 2013). However, many of these criticisms come from Western political analysts, and reflect their biased and “Western-centric” vision, driven mainly by the possible danger that these countries could represent (Stuenkel, 2016).

Moving beyond this controversy about Western or non-Western theories (Stuenkel, 2016; Acharya and Buzan, 2009), it is interesting to respond to some questions on the BRICS growth, especially in light of recent events. To do this, we use the support of the Critical Theory of International Relations, and also the Dependency Theory in our analysis. To understand what is happening, it is useful to interpret it in the light of the center-periphery cleavage, elaborated by Wallerstein (1974), and question whether this paradigm is actually changing and in what form. Furthermore, we stress the role of international institutions, of the hegemonic “bloc” and of the economic-geopolitical structures, which are key topics of classical IR theorists like Cox (1983).

On the basis of these clarifications, we interpret the term (global) “hegemony” as a social, economic and political structure at the same time expressed with universalist forms which support the dominant model of production, in line with what is claimed by Keohane (1984) as a sufficient power to establish international rule. In this sense, the capitalist system as the dominant model of production is based on liberal dictates that so far have been a driving force especially in Western countries (i.e. the United States and the Western European countries that won the Second World War). According to these premises, we wonder whether the Western hegemonic model is still dominant or is changing.

There are theories that explain how the world is experiencing a decline of Western (US-led) order (Acharya, 2014) even if it is not yet clear whether Western decline is inexorable (while BRICS have been reaching a more significant world standing in recent years). Although there is no decline in terms of “hard power”, i.e. from a military coercion point of view, there are several signs that indicate a weakening of Western countries in different areas. In our opinion these areas are mainly: (1) “institutional”, linked to the Bretton Woods institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), which are no longer able to reflect a world in which emerging countries like the BRICS have become increasingly important, (2) “soft power”, in which, despite the Western countries (above all the Western-EU and the US) still having a strong influence, the BRICS are undergoing a “soft power war” that could also affect their weight from a cultural influence point of view. Furthermore, within the issue of soft power and the construction of an accountable image, the position taken with regard to climate change is of particular importance. This issue represents a benchmark for building an accountable image, and while some Western countries are assuming ambiguous positions, the BRICS countries, albeit with limitations and contradictions, seem more oriented toward finding decisive solutions, at least in words. At the same time, it seems that recent events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, could represent more fields in which the struggle to gain a more accountable image will take place (Morten and Gramer, 2020; Ninio, 2020).

Finally, we considered the (3) “geopolitical” sphere. Unless the US and its allies seek a consensus based on military force (which, although not impossible, could have unthinkable consequences, and therefore an option that we do not consider here), in the future we could see changes in paradigm based on a greater presence of the BRICS in areas of the world that have so far been dependent on the Western powers.

In this sense, although it is still too early to say, is it possible for us to hypothesize that the BRICS may one day replace the current hegemonic powers, overturning that center-peripheral paradigm theorized by Wallerstein? Will they look for a new form of hegemony or do they represent the cross-section of a reality in which multilateralism, or a “multiplex world” (Acharya, 2017), is already underway? Furthermore, if the BRICS are potential new hegemonies of the global order, do they have any limitations?

We are aware that this paper will not be enough to provide an answer to these questions. However, we will try to explore these issues by analyzing those three areas in which we see a (prospective) weakening of Western countries.

For analytical purposes these three areas are more tangible in highlighting the progress made by the BRICS and to conjecture what the potential consequences on GG are. We could also have considered economic growth but, in our opinion, this gives importance to this aspect in the way that is projected from outside, and therefore in the areas we have considered. Furthermore, we could have also explored the role that civil society plays in the formulation of policy making, which is indeed an important aspect for the future of GG. However, it seems that its role does not have an effective value even in Western countries (Kroger, 2008) and we share the vision that Western civil society often reflects a neoliberal vision that uses transnational ties as a means of implementing a certain type of West-led governance (Friedrichs, 2005).

### **Institutional Aspect**

First of all, regarding the “institutional” aspect, it is important to understand the role of the new financial mechanisms and institutions created by the BRICS, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), but also by China, which can be considered as the BRICS’ leader in terms of economic power, of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), for instance. The nature of these institutions is probably the consequence of a response to a system of international governance institutions (primarily IMF and WB) that did not meet the needs of reform required by the BRICS (BRIC, 2009). On this point, the critical theory supports us because international institutions have important functions with regards to the substratum that they represent for world hegemony (Cox, 1983). Probably the reason why these institutions arise cannot be read only as an expression of a new hegemonic order, but also as a search of other spaces in which to have a greater say (Liao, 2015). However, it seems that the emergence of these institutions is still an interesting aspect in understanding how the system of institutional governance under the aegis of the Washington Consensus has been deeply challenged, not only because of its malfunctions (Stiglitz, 2002) but also because of the decisive role of the BRICS in creating “parallel” institutions that can act independently and following different parameters from those of Bretton Woods.

The Critical Theory considers international institutions, and therefore the institutions of global governance, as the means by which a new form of hegemony can be established (Cox, 1983). However, the BRICS financial institutions can be considered more as an attempt to find new ways of escaping the restrictions and impediments that Bretton Woods institutions have imposed on them (Parizek and Stephen, 2017) than a desire to build a new form of hegemony. In fact, while the BRICS have not abandoned the Bretton Woods institutions, they have in all probability tried to seek new ways of projecting their growing economic power away from the Western-led international financial order represented by institutions such as the IMF, the WB, and the WTO (Weisbrot and Johnston, 2009 and 2016; Kaya, 2018).

The BRICS found themselves on the one hand dependent on the moods of the Western powers, with a feeling underrepresentation, and on the other hand, experienced economic growth that was in fact an expression of a changing world. Not surprisingly, one of the first statements they made during their summits was precisely to contribute to modeling the current system of financial



governance to reflect changes taking place in the world (BRIC, 2009). In practice, it is an attempt to give voice to their now clear ability to influence.

However, how do we answer the question as to whether the BRICS countries are struggling to create a new institutional system? We believe that at the moment the bloc is certainly acting in the direction of the creation of new spaces, within the current global order, in which they can have greater decision-making power and a more specific possibility of gaining effective and practical access to loans and funds (Morse and Keohane, 2014) without depending on the Bretton Woods claims for debts payments. Thus, the emergence of new or “parallel” financial institutions seems to inaugurate a path on which the BRICS can pursue their economic interests freely, and at the same time maintain their membership of traditional institutions of GG. On this point, we can conclude that the BRICS are probably opening up new avenues in order to have a greater voice in several key areas, but at the same time they do not seem to be able to nor in the mood to change the course of workings of international institutions. Thus, at the moment the Critical Theory vision of the international institutions as a means of inaugurating a new international system (IS) does not seem to be applicable in this context. The BRICS do not appear to be in the mood to change the current institutional order completely by creating a bloc opposing the West. Indeed, there are some signs that they are trying to avoid isolation, as in the case of the Chinese AIIB that allowed other countries from the western world to become members, such as is the case of some European countries (Perlez, 2014). At the same time the group does not show particular interest in what happens in each individual country: a principle inspired by the concept of non-interference, where institutions like the AIIB and NDB only grant funds based on the validity of a project (Abdenur and Folly, 2015; Peng and Tok, 2016). This principle contrasts with the Bretton Woods institutions which require the compliance with liberal principles (respect of human rights, rule of law, etc.) in order to provide loans to member states in crisis.

These few examples can demonstrate how the BRICS’ intentions, at the moment, seem more directed to finding solutions to problems such as underrepresentation and slow bureaucracy, rather than subverting the current order. Also, during the recent pandemic emergency, a speedy bureaucracy has worked to provide loans to member states of the NDB. Thanks to the establishments of an Emergency Assistance Facility, BRICS countries have adopted a quick tool to receive financial aid in the face of the COVID-19 crisis (New Development Bank, 2020; Financial Express, 2020). On the other side, the Bretton Woods institutions have been criticized for their slow and complicated economic mechanisms in reacting to this issue of global importance (Bretton Woods Project, 2020; Gross, 2020). Moreover, over the course of this pandemic, internal divisions between EU members states have emerged as a result of the debate on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). This debate has exacerbated European fragility and fragmentation, while at the same time it has represented a slow response to the crisis.

Perhaps these situations further explain how the BRICS are providing an insight into how they will pursue a more active role and have quicker outcomes. Within the established order, these countries have inaugurated different ways of responding to their own necessities. As such, however, it seems that they have not created new institutions which would act as a vehicle for the diffusion of a new hegemonic order.

## **Soft Power**

The second point concerns the scope of the so-called “soft power”. In this area, theorized by the political scientist Nye (2004), the BRICS in recent years have tried to fill those gaps that undermine their credibility (Bruk, 2013; Wu and Alden, 2014). In this sense, their commitment to global issues such as climate change or cooperation in key sectors such as sustainability development could actually contribute to improving their international image. However, some limitations exist: the BRICS remain far from bridging certain gaps. We refer to dependence on coal, oil, etc., but at the same time issues such as Bolsonaro’s election in Brazil, who has repeatedly stated that he wants to exit COP21 (Agencia Brazil, 2018) and move closer to the US. Under this point there are countless contradictions, but it is also true that the BRICS approach seems, despite its limitations, more concrete on this global issue: if the BRICS succeed in developing greater cooperation, despite their problems, rather than acting as rivals (Deepak, 2016), they will probably have the opportunity of acquiring greater power to influence, and thus build a more accountable image of themselves.

Another point is that populist policies have become rampant in Europe/US, as in some BRICS countries such as Russia and Brazil itself. However, while in Europe populism is leading to progressive fragmentation, leading to clashes on issues such as migrants, populism among the BRICS (with the exception of Brazil) is not preventing countries from continuing to seek ever greater cooperation between each other (during their summits, the BRICS always reiterate the necessity to strengthening cooperation).

In any case, before starting a deeper analysis on these issues, we have to wonder what “soft power” means. The meaning of “soft power” has been greatly debated in recent decades. Broadly speaking, it can be explained as the ability to influence others to get the outcomes one wants without the use of coercion. This, applied to the IS, means not using conventional means, namely hard power which refers to “the ability to use carrots and sticks of economic and military strength to make others follow your will” (Stuenkel, 2016:102), but the power of inspiration, emulation and attraction where one country influences others. In Nye’s view (2004), one of the top representative examples could be the US and their great culture attraction and influence throughout the IS. It is thus a country’s ability to get what it wants by attracting and persuading others to adopt its goals: the meaning of “soft power” involves the ability of leading by example.

In recent years a more decisive need of developing soft power and have more power to influence has taken hold. That is what Nye said about the US: these have been able, according to him, to maintain their role as leaders especially because of their soft power (Nye, 2004). However, there are critics of Nye’s theory, underlining how this view does not take into account that the soft power exerted by the US (and West in general) has often been combined with the army: the US and, in general, western countries were models that inspired, but at the same time they were able to impose their power of attraction mainly thanks to military support or economic constraints (Stuenkel, 2016).

## **The Brics and Their Struggle to Boost Their Soft Power**

Also, the BRICS, in recent years, have started to develop their soft power more decisively. The union of BRICS and its cooperation projects and actions are great tools of continuous increase of soft power, mainly because they are “emerging countries” in search of mutual development. In

general, emerging powers, such as the BRICS, rely on soft power through cooperation – particularly among themselves – but are also interested in playing the role of regional power, especially since the BRICS is a geographically diverse group, adding this global reach to the group's power and interest (Buzan, 2004). But in the last years, there have been several initiatives to increase this “charm power” trying to enlarge their influence in a more global framework.

Here is a summary of some initiatives to boost their accountable image.

Despite having suffered a loss of image in recent months as a result of Bolsonaro's declarations (The BRICS Post, 2018), Brazil has always manifested an international position devoted to the respect and promotion of peace and security in dealing with international issues, and has also promoted multilateralism, the respect of international law, and the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty. At the same time, it has worked as a bridge between developed and developing countries (Chatin and Gallarotti, 2016).

In recent years, Russia has also suffered to a certain degree from its “bad image” due to multiple decisions taken at an international level (e.g. during the conflict in Donbass) but also nationally (for example, with regard to the so called gay “propaganda” ban). However, the country has tried to create several channels in order to fill this gap, with the aim of reversing the existing image of the country, and in which it is increasingly trying to spread its own ideas: such as through Russia Today (RT), an international television network funded by the Russian government. It has also launched “Sputnik”, a government-funded network of news hubs in more than thirty countries, in order to challenge the US's power in this field. Moreover, Russia has inaugurated several initiatives to promote its cultural heritage, its language and its culture (Stuenkel, 2016; Chatin and Gallarotti, 2016).

China launched a project with a \$6.58 billion budget called *waixuan gongzuo*, which can be translated as “overseas propaganda”, while at the same time it has spent a significant amount on spreading its culture and language by means of the so-called ‘Confucius Institutes’ initiative (Beeson and Xu, 2016; Stuenkel, 2016), just to give some examples. At the same time, China often undertakes initiatives targeted at promoting its image as a global leader. In fact, with regard to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, after being the country most seriously affected, it has later been able to re-vindicate its global leadership in dealing with the virus. This could probably be interpreted as a means by which it can fight to reinforce its soft power and its accountability image (Morten & Gramer, 2020; Ninio, 2020).

India's bolstering of its image through the creation of Bollywood to challenge the US's power in the entertainment industry show its intent on expanding its charm power. At the same time, India has worked a lot on the expansion of digital media and internet.

Finally, South African commitment to human rights and solidarity, its multilateral foreign policy and nuclear disarmament, its fight against Apartheid and the hosting of major sporting events (i.e. 2010 FIFA World Cup), and its strength in supporting new regional institutions, such as the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), to promote Africa's weight in international forums, are significant examples of its interest in increasing its soft power.

Therefore, the BRICS are attempting to fill their gaps in soft power. However, although their interest is in increasing their soft power, there is still some way to go. BRICS have the potential to build a “large” soft power base, but in any event, as of yet, they are not playing a relevant role in this field at an international level, even if they are struggling to mold a more accountable image of

themselves. In fact, the BRICS countries are not yet able to be a role model in soft power, as they still suffer from Western “superiority” in this field: Western countries still offer models which are more attractive than those of the BRICS, even if most of the time, especially considering the power influence of the US, this is directly tied to security guarantees (Stuenkel, 2016). On the other hand, the claim for more cooperation among BRICS countries (BRICS, 2018), their potential to make their cooperation more effective (Dixon, 2015), and at the same time the power influence that BRICS can have on the Global South, could have positive results in the future.

Given this, we consider that there is an important benchmark where BRICS could try to attain greater influence, establish a more accountable image of themselves and try to be leaders in dealing in this field, thereby improving their soft power. That field being climate change.

### **Brics and Climate Change**

BRICS power to seduce from a cultural point of view, and consequently exert a more decisive influence from this side is still weak. In any case, soft power could undergo considerable developments if these countries actually become promoters of a GG that really wants to take into consideration global issues such as climate change. Climate change is a decisive benchmark to measure the real attitude and capacity of building a credible and accountable soft power leadership, and at the same time act as global models (Petroni, 2019).

Although the soft power concept is spreading in several cultural areas, in diplomacy, and in the way in which a country deals with global issues, climate change represents a significant threat and a most pressing issue to deal with. According to these considerations, we wonder if the BRICS can actually find a compact role in this area. Beyond their particular interests, if the BRICS were to become credible leaders in managing global issues such as climate change, could they also become leaders in soft power?

First of all, Western countries are experiencing a moment of discord from the point of view of leadership on issues of global interest such as climate change (Acharya, 2017). Despite publicly claiming the importance of taking action against global problems, in practice they pursue policies that deviate from a real will to reverse course. The most emblematic case is undoubtedly that of the US, and its attitude towards the COP21-Paris agreements, but also other Western countries are doing little to cope with this global threat. In fact, while European countries are all rated as “insufficient” in a report on their fulfillment of the Paris Agreement, the US, which abandoned the COP21 agreements in 2019, is classified as “critically insufficient” (Climate Action Tracker, 2020).

In this scenario, we wonder if favorable prospects are opening up for the BRICS to play a leading role given that Western countries are experiencing increasing fragmentation in this field.

There is no doubt that the BRICS industrial production processes still need energy sources, such as coal, which will remain so for a long time to come. However, despite their dependence on a fuel source related to the high rate of pollution, these countries have started to invest in sustainable resources. This is clearly a good sign. Among the investments of the NDB there are huge sums that are destined to the development of alternative energy sources of renewable energy (Esteves, Torres and Zoccal, 2016), and the AIIB has repeatedly been declared as “green” institution (Shengdun, 2018). We believe that in this context the BRICS can increase their credibility by trying to create a credible partnership in taking concrete action on climate change and within the field of renewable

energy. This partnership could really play a decisive role in contributing to GG and increase their soft power (Petrone, 2019).

In any event, China, India and South Africa are still largely dependent on coal, which represents half of the total energy demand in all three countries, and both in Russia and Brazil oil and gas represent the main source for the primary energy demand: 73% in Russia and 62% in Brazil (Downie and Williams, 2018). At the same time, there are no encouraging answers when taking into consideration their shift towards alternative energies and the reduction of their emissions. In fact, four of the five members achievements are classified as “insufficient” (Brazil), “highly insufficient” (China and South Africa), and “critically insufficient” (Russia) on Climate Action Tracker (2020) web page. Only India is rated “2°C compatible”. After adopting its National Electricity Plan (NEP) in 2018, India’s climate action is considered to be on track to achieving the Paris COP21 Agreement (Climate Action Tracker, 2020). This means that for the BRICS, there is still a long way to go in order to fulfill their COP21 commitments, and above all to reach common targets. However, important steps in the improvement of their common strength in order to reach more “sustainable” objectives could be achieved by intensifying their cooperation in certain strategic areas related to climate change, such as energy efficiency and agriculture (Downie and Williams, 2018). At the same time, more accountable policies dedicated to mitigation and adaptation in each country would underline their real effort in reaching adequate and common goals in this sense. In this sense, if efficient and decisive action to cooperate in those areas is developed, soft power will in all likelihood also benefit. In fact, even if their commitments seem insufficient, they could play an important role in climate change through looking for greater cooperation to improve their image and to obtain a better emulation capacity.

Ultimately, given their soft power potential, and their still low ability to compete with Western countries, a shared and more concrete effort towards climate change could give them a very different image and especially fill the gaps with regard to the West’s supremacy in this field.

However, on the other hand, ironically, it seems that in this field Western countries are losing ground (as we have seen), thus favoring a perspective growth in the BRICS soft power. This does not mean that nothing is being done in Western countries, but that there is more interest in following the capitalistic path of development, often seen as the main cause of the current climate situation (Klein, 2015), instead of trying to convert it or at least give it a more “human shape”. This means that their actions to cope with COP21 promises, and in general with climate change issues, is weak compared to their potential responsibility, and above all the historical leading role that they have claimed worldwide. Also, in this field, the EU and the US ambiguous attitude could open up a way for the BRICS countries to gain a more central role.

BRICS countries could profit from this situation by gaining a significant boost to their soft power. In order to reach this, they should move beyond their rhetorical discourse and try to take effective action as their potential demonstrates in the above-mentioned areas. This means that they could contribute to a creating different scenario on the climate governance agenda and indeed shape it.

However, apart from the above-mentioned limitations, is this a realistic scenario (i.e. BRICS as leaders in global issues as climate change)? Are there further limitations?

First of all, to answer to this question, we have to consider that there are still some important issues that undermine the BRICS stability. We can consider several examples in this sense: the rivalry between China and India (Basile and Cecchi, 2018); the growing power of China compared to the rest of the group, which could represent an imbalance within the BRICS (see, for example,

the growing importance of the “Belt and Road Initiative”); the difference in interests in reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where China and Russia are permanent members and do not seem to be all that interested in enlarging the UNSC to other members, included other BRICS countries (Abb and Jetschke, 2019); also the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, who has seriously threatened the unity of the group by taking a position of criticism against China and by declaring a greater closeness to the US partnership (Agencia Brazil, 2018; Casarões, 2018). Thus, this could represent a problem for BRICS which could undergo a serious fragmentation in turn. However, the realization of Bolsonaro’s objectives seems difficult to achieve. In fact, in addition to having already begun to reverse course, after being elected, on some of his previous statements (BRICS, 2018), Brazil remains strongly dependent on the relationship with China since China is the country’s primary commercial partner (Casarões, 2018). Moreover, the BRICS group is the only forum in which Brazil has important privileges, such as that of being part of the NDB, where Brazil has decisively more say than in the Bretton Woods institutions (Petrone, 2019). Thus, in terms of strategic convenience there is sufficient reason to believe that Brazil’s negative attitude towards the BRICS group may be counterproductive for Brazil itself.

To conclude, we argue that the BRICS could really build a more accountable image of themselves in the future. However, they will undoubtedly need to face the above-mentioned challenges, which will probably also have a decisive impact on their “soft power” capacity-building, hegemonic power and more generally on GG.

### **Geopolitical Aspect**

Regarding the “geopolitical” aspect, we want to highlight some attempts by the BRICS to increase the presence in the rest of the world. In this context, those countries which play a more decisive role are undoubtedly China, India and Russia, but it seems that the discourse here involves a separate treatment, because what the BRICS represent at the geopolitical level is above all their image of acting as a spokesperson for the Global South. It seems that if the BRICS are able to acquire a more credible image, they will (probably) position themselves as serious and decisive spokesmen for those who have so far represented the “periphery”. At this point the question would become more complex because we would end up with a West that is undergoing a (presumably) progressive decline, and the “rest” that, under the hegemonic push of the BRICS, could represent a strong substratum and, hypothetically, subvert the current order.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the BRICS have started initiatives in order to increase their presence in the Global South and probably act as its spokesperson. However, their ability to have a greater influence on the “periphery” depends on how BRICS manage to stay cohesive.

Some examples of BRICS countries initiatives to open up new ways to increase their influence include: the “Belt and Road initiative”, increased cooperation among themselves, the inauguration of new policies in several Global South areas, where the presence of BRICS countries such as China and India is growing a lot and which is also having the effect of obscuring Western “domination” (Evans-Pritchard, 2018). China, for example, has adopted a specific strategy to increase its importance in several Global South areas: for example, by promising non-repayable loans (Shukla, 2018) but also by fostering its presence by building infrastructure and improving services. Also, Russia has grown its presence in Africa by inaugurating strategic partnerships (Klomegah, 2018; Ross, 2018), it has re-established its presence in the Middle East and offers itself as a potential partner of countries that are affected by the influence by of the West.

Furthermore, the recent COVID-19 pandemic seems to open up new opportunities for the BRICS to expand their presence worldwide through the form of aids in facing this global issue, but also by claiming the importance of multilateral cooperation, especially after US declared that they would stay away from the initiative launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) in April 2020 to face the pandemic. Thus, “BRICS is interested in both taking advantage of the emerging opportunities and dealing with the challenges. [...] Experts have argued that BRICS members meet to discuss various global issues, and plan its joint collaborative projects on the global landscape” (Klomegah, 2020).

Thus, in recent years the presence of the BRICS countries in the rest of the world has grown exponentially. Where does this interest come from? Certainly, they have understood the importance of creating a partnership with other “peripheral” countries and the potential to configuring themselves as the real voice of the Global South. Their behavior, together with historical and colonialist motives, could favor a greater rapprochement towards these emerging powers.

However, the BRICS must pay attention to the model they want to develop in the Global South, and keep in mind the real and concrete will to cooperate, as they could actually fall into the trap of creating new forms of imperialism or “sub-imperialism” (Nayyar, 2016) inaugurating a new dependency within the Global South that could ironically surpass Western (historical) colonialism to a new level under the dominance of the emerging powers.

It is still too early to understand what will happen, and also, everything depends on the future relations that will be established in the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The above-mentioned attempts by China to tackle this issue by acting as a global leader and helping other countries in facing the virus could probably have its benefits for the Global South. And this could be an important means for other BRICS countries to establish a more decisive presence in these areas.

However, we can surely state that in a chaotic world, in which there are multiple actors that fight for leadership, the *balance of power* is now under threat. As the theory of neorealism states, a world with multiple centers of powers is not stable (Waltz, 1979), and it could descend into direct confrontation thus leading to war. In any case, the reality is that future international relations will probably go through a series of crises (economic, migration, climate change, etc.) that will reshape the global order, in which emerging countries such as the BRICS will surely have more weight, and consequently the ability to shape GG architecture.

At the moment, the US’s recent isolationist and protectionist policies do not lend themselves to promoting a multilateral world. In any event, the BRICS actions could contribute to putting into practice a world with many centers of power which now demands recognition. This situation seems more credible than a subverted central-peripheral paradigm, in which the BRICS become the center and the West the periphery. And at the same time, the BRICS seem more oriented towards a policy of appeasement, rather than one of war and confrontation.

## Conclusions

On the basis of what we have described, many questions arise: will there be a change of hegemonic power at the international level? Would it be more realistic to say that the foundations are being created in the construction of a multilateral world order? With the emergence of new institutions,

the need for the BRICS to improve their accountability through soft power, or their interest in spreading their influence to new areas of the world, must this necessarily be read as a threat to the global system? Is US unipolarity likely coming to an end?

The rise of emerging countries as with the BRICS is often seen as a threat, or even a chaotic event. However, we have the impression that this view reflects a Western-based vision which lacks objectivity and could generate more confusion. Commenting on this issue, Oliver Stuenkel stated:

*Echoing a broad consensus in the West, The Economist in 2014 matter-of-factly stated, “Unfortunately, Pax Americana is giving way to a balance of power that is seething with rivalry and insecurity.” While chaos and disorder are indeed possible scenarios, Western-centrism profoundly impoverishes our analysis of the dynamics that will shape global order in the coming decades (Stuenkel, 2016:7).*

On the other hand, the way in which Western countries are acting in relation to global issues would indicate that they are far from reaching a solution, above all because of the fragmentation they are undergoing. This produces even more uncertainty about how to deal with these issues and what shape future GG will take. Regarding GG, it seems that this paradigm is not experiencing its best moment. In addition to the current fragmentation, the Western mold that has shaped GG up until now has experienced certain intolerance on the part of those countries which are trying to reshape it.

This is the case of the BRICS, which are attempting, at least in words, to be an agent of change in the global paradigm. Certainly, the BRICS will have to improve and deal with several issues in order to truly represent a bloc of nations which is credible and open to new areas of influence within the international framework. There are both internal issues and external problems connected to the uniformity of their intentions. However, as emerged from their last summit (BRICS, 2019), these countries are trying to strengthen their cooperation and efforts to converge on certain areas. If they succeed in creating a greater affinity among themselves, the international order could probably take on a different shape in the near future.

Considering the crises that are afflicting the West, which has lost its historic “central role”, we wonder if the BRICS will be able to fill the looming power vacuum. From a “soft power” point of view their influence is still not very incisive, and in this context the West is still in the vanguard. But the attitude that the West is taking towards global issues such as climate change and COVID-19 shows that their leadership skills are also suffering in this area.

If the BRICS wish to stand out as leaders on these issues and inspire changes to get out of the gridlock, they can also gain more importance in terms of soft power, and thus gain more credibility in the global arena. It is a difficult challenge, but the “decline” of the West could open up these paths. The process is already under way, so it is difficult to predict what effect such a scenario could have on the rest of the globe.

A decisive reshaping of GG will depend, in our opinion, on how the BRICS will be able to strengthen their proximity and cooperation in the three areas considered (Institutional, Soft Power and Geopolitics), by overcoming the above-mentioned limitations. However, it is certain that the BRICS are a decisive group and already exert an important presence on the world stage. Above all, as Paulo Esteves argues: “the world today looks much more like a world built in the image of the BRICS – in other words, a world that has multiple poles of power, rather than the image of the



West” (Andreoni and Casado, 2019). Thus, the BRICS have become the expression of this current (multipolar) world.

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