

The BRICS: Ambiguous - but with anti-hegemonial potential

A European View

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1. The international system in transition

Those who have experienced the period of the Cold War, will remember, that the configuration of the international system is not something that happens in a remote universe, far away from daily life of ordinary people. The rivalry of the two superpowers at that time had strong consequences on domestic policies, on the economy, on social conditions and on cultural developments in many countries.

The same can be said about the period of unipolar dominance of the US as the only super power after the end of the Cold War. Although the implementation of neoliberalism and finance capitalism in the nineties has several sources, the triumph of free market capitalism would not have been that overwhelming without the new global balance of power. Also the “War on Terror” with all its consequences on so many countries, including the US themselves, reflect the unipolar structure of the international system during this era.

Today, the international system is again undergoing a deep transition. With the rise of China, the come back of Russia as a major player, the emergence of countries such as Brazil and India as important actors and the formation of new coalitions and alliances, such as the BRICS, the Eurasian Union, the Shanghai Cooperation etc. the world is heading towards a multipolar system – perhaps with a bipolar element (US-China) in its core.

1.1. The US will remain on top for some while

Of course this does not mean that the US will become insignificant. Looking at military power the US will remain by far the leading player for a long time. With military expenditure of 640.221 trillion the US still spends more than three times the amount of the second in the global ranking, with 188.460 trillion USD (China).¹

Also economically the US will still stay on top for a while. In that respect it would be misleading to only look at GDP figures.² There is not only the huge difference in economic wealth per capita but also qualitative dimensions of the economy, for instance the fact that US technology and US corporations have the lead in the most advanced and dynamic sectors of the digital economy (Apple, Google, Microsoft etc.).

Nevertheless, many developments in recent years and in particular events in 2014 have shown both the limits of the US capabilities and the increasing role of the new comers. As most spectacular examples the results of US lead wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya could be cited, leaving behind failed states and the strengthening of radical Islamic forces, or the case of Syria, as well as the failure to isolate Russia globally in the Ukrainian crisis, or last but not least the financial crash in 2008, which was a heavy blow to the Anglo-Saxon model of finance capitalism. Also the moral standing of the US has suffered considerably if we look at the torture practices admitted recently by an official report, the drone war ignoring international law and human rights, the global spying practices of NSA as revealed by Edward Snowden or the persisting racism against Afro-Americans by police and some elements of the judicial system as revealed by the Ferguson riots.

All in all, the US will gradually lose its power monopoly. If you look at Obama’s speech on foreign policy from May 2014 at West Point Academy,³ it seems, that parts of the US elites have understood the new situation and want to adapt, while, of course, still trying to maintain as much dominance as possible. The question is, whether this half-way realistic position survives the next elections and will not be replaced by a more aggressive approach.

1.2. Risks of transition

The re-configuration of the international system is at its beginning and nobody knows how the process will evolve in detail. But it is obvious that in the light of an ever increasing inter-

¹ SIPRI: http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database

² According to the IMF’s *World Economic Outlook* from October 2014, China has in 2014 already passed the US GDP in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). Again in terms of PPP the theoretical G7 of the leading economic powers would be: China, US, India, Japan, Germany, Russia, Brazil. The UK, France, Italy and Canada would not be any more in that G7.

³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-west-point-academy-commencement-ceremony>

dependency in the globalised world, the changes will affect the domestic situation of all nation states and daily life of people everywhere more than ever.

While some might look forward to the changes – with some good arguments, as there is a potential for a more democratic international system – there are a lot of risks in such transition processes, too. As we are commemorating this year the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, it should be reminded that this disaster was the culminating point of another dramatic transition of the international system. The European pentarchy⁴ in the second half of the 19th century was characterised by the hegemony of the British Empire in military, economic and technological terms. However, it was increasingly challenged by the rise of imperial Germany, and to a lesser extent by tsarist Russia. Already around 1890 German industrial production had passed the UK.

A rising and a declining power were fighting over hegemony on the continent. At the same time there was an overall competition of all against all over colonial territories in Africa and Asia. Two big military alliances were existing, one between France and Russia, indirectly linked to the UK on the one side, and one between Germany and Austria also involving Italy and the Osman empire on the other. The configuration was overarched by strong if not fanatic nationalism in all countries. When in such a precarious and unstable structure imperial Germany decided to seize the opportunity of the assassination of the Austrian heiress to the throne to go to war, the catastrophe was triggered. Although it is exaggerated to interpret the way into the war in terms of “sleepwalking” as the title of a bestseller suggests⁵ – there is clearly a special responsibility of imperial Germany – the structure and dynamics of the international system are highly relevant factors for its evolvment. The European system in 1914 was also in transition. And this transition period engendered tremendous instability, tensions and conflict long before the *Great War* broke out.

Of course, history does not repeat itself. But it can deliver some insights into the logics of international processes.

For civil society, the changes represent a lot of new challenges. Many new questions have come up, to which we have no definite answers, among them the question how to relate to the BRICS.

1.3. Geopolitics – an ambiguous concept

Among the first question to be considered, are the paradigmatic fundamentals, the values and principles, which govern international relations. It is a reality that elites - political, military and economic - and a whole bunch of think-tanks, institutes academia and publications around them follow the logics of geopolitics.

Initially the concept of geopolitics meant that there is a link between the geographical situation of a country and its foreign policy. A well-known example is the interpretation of Prussian – later on imperial German - foreign policy in the nineteenth century as a result of its medium position between Russia in the East and France and the UK in the West. German foreign policy should therefore aim at balancing or bridging between East and West. Bismarck was the most prominent representative of this geopolitical approach. But although today, too, the geographic situation of a country might not be completely irrelevant – for instance neighbourhood between countries is still an important factor⁶ - for complex modern societies geography is only one factor among many others.

Today, the concept of geopolitics is still used - however in a double sense:

- a. as an analytical tool for the international system and the relations between states and groups of states;
- b. as a strategy and normative orientation for foreign policies of a country, in particular by the so called “*realistic school*.”

⁴ UK, France, tsarist Russia, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and imperial Germany.

⁵ Clark, Christopher (2012): *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914*. London

⁶ In that sense the different processes of regional integration in Europe (EU), Latin America (Mercosur, ALBA) and others can be interpreted in terms of geopolitics.

In the contemporary use, the concept is more or less used as a synonym for power relations and power politics between countries or groups of countries. And power is based in this context on the following sources:

- a. military power,
- b. economic strength,
- c. political and diplomatic influence,
- d. cultural attractiveness (soft power).

All these factors are interrelated among each other. From these elements, the balance of power and its modifications have a decisive influence over the evolution of the international system with respective repercussions on domestic developments in each country.

From an emancipatory point of view, the geopolitical discourse has several problematic dimensions. There are basic and unquestioned assumptions, which work as implicit normative orientations, such as the belief that:

- it is normal or even natural that countries are always seeking to acquire as much power as possible,
- that a hierarchy in the international system is normal or even natural,
- that every country should strive to reach the highest possible ranking in that hierarchy,
- that permanent competition and rivalry is therefore a fundamental dynamics of international relations,
- that dynamics which are different from or opposed to competition such as cooperation and alliance-building are subordinated to the overarching ratio of competition,
- that military power is the most important component of power (military bias),
- that the use of military power – be it as a threat (deterrence), be it as a real war – is a legitimate tool of foreign politics,
- that there is something like a national interest, which would be shared by all members of a society, irrespective of their social position and political, ideological and other orientations, thus hiding that geopolitical strategies are defined by the dominant elites, while ordinary people usually have to pay the bill for the geopolitical ambition of elites.

Once the logic of geopolitics is hegemonial in a society, it has consequences also inside the resp. society. One of the most frequent ones is the perception of the own country as being automatically “the good one,” as reflected in the famous dictum „*In matters of foreign affairs, my country may she ever be right, but right or wrong, my country, my country!*“ attributed to the US naval officer *Stephen Decatur jun.* in 1805. Geopolitical thinking is hence often interconnected with patriotism, nationalism, chauvinism and similar narratives, which construct collective identities as superior over others. In times of increasing conflicts these narratives gain importance. A recent example for this view was expressed in a keynote speech on foreign affairs by Barack Obama in May 2014: “*So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come. ... I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.*” (Obama 2014). This type of pre-enlightenment chauvinism⁷ can be seen mirror-inverted in China, Russia, Islamic countries and many others - and they interact between each other in a kind of negative feed-back. At present we can study these mechanisms like in a schoolbook in Europe between NATO countries and Russia and in East Asia between the US, Japan and some allies on the one side and China on the other.

The power and competition dominated character of the international system is not only a source of conflict and war but also an obstacle to solve the trans-border global problems of humanity, such as climate change, resource scarcity, poverty and equitable international economic relations.

⁷ Wikipedia defines chauvinism as „*an exaggerated patriotism and a belligerent belief in national superiority and glory.*“

Nevertheless: although geopolitics as a strategic and normative concept is highly problematic for an emancipatory approach to international relations, it is a matter of fact, that it is a fundamental reality in the international system. In spite of its ideological character it meets – like all ideologies, otherwise they would not work – certain aspects of reality. Practically all nation states all over the world act inside the coordinates of geopolitics – whether we like it or not. It therefore can be used as an analytical tool, while rejecting its normative dimension. As for alternatives, we'll come back to this at the end.

2. Heterogeneous but with anti-hegemonial potential

The BRICS are a new phenomenon. The project is at its beginnings, and we don't know how far it will go. So, many of our assessments have a preliminary character. For the moment being, it is obvious that the BRICS are more than just another formal group like the G77 in the UN, or similar conglomerates, because with the *New Development Bank (NDB)*, a common *Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA)* concrete and important steps of economic integration have been undertaken. On the other hand, the degree of integration in the BRICS is lower than in the G7, which are also integrated in a military alliance (NATO), with the exception of Japan, which, however, is tied into the group through bilateral military arrangements with the US, the leader of NATO.

2.1. A strange mixture of countries

Looking at the BRICS, the first impression is that it is a strange mixture of countries. The members are extremely different in terms of economic size and structure, with populations ranging from 50 million (South Africa) to 30 times bigger China with its 1,4 billion (see table 1), and in many other aspects. They have very different political systems, history and culture. Brazil is a Western type of democracy with a strong civil society and culturally quite close to Southern Europe, whereas China is ruled through a single party system, which is formally named communist. An autonomous civil society does almost not exist in the country. India, too, has a Western type of political system, but a very strong culture of its own and a strong civil society. Russia's political system is formally democratic with a highly centralised presidential system, favouring authoritarian tendencies and with deficits concerning the rule of law and human rights. Culturally Russia is Slavic-European and the large majority of the population is concentrated in the European part. However, the lion's share of its territory is in Asia and reaches out to the Pacific. In so far Russia is also an Asian and Pacific country.

At first glance, the mandate of the BRICS is restricted to economic issues. However, it would be naïve not see the geopolitical dimension of the economy and the economic relations between nation states, as the case of sanctions against Russia, Iran, Cuba and North Korea clearly show. This is why, the BRICS agenda has implicit and indirect military dimensions and an adequate analysis has to take this into consideration.

In military terms Russia is the only country worldwide to have a nuclear second strike capacity against the US (see also chapter 2.3.). At present it is rapidly modernizing its military forces. The country has several political and ethnical conflict zones at its borders (Transnistria - Moldavia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia - Georgia) and a very strong confrontation with NATO over the Ukraine.⁸ China is undergoing a rapid build up of its military forces. It has border conflicts with India in Cashmere, and with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines in the Chinese Sea, accompanied by a regional arms race and general build up of tensions with the US in the Pacific. India has permanent strong tensions- among them also a border conflict with Pakistan in Cashmere - and the same border conflict there with China. In the past, there has been an element of rivalry in Sino-Indian relations, whereas China and Pakistan have been

⁸ On the Ukraine see: Kissinger, Henry (2014): Do We Achieve World Order Through Chaos or Insight? Interview with DER SPIEGEL (in English). Hamburg.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073.html>

Mearsheimer, John J. (2014): How the West Caused the Ukraine Crisis. Foreign Affairs. Sept/Oct. 2014

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141769/john-j-mearsheimer/why-the-ukraine-crisis-is-the-west-fault>

Trenin, Dmitri (2014): Ukraine and the New Divide. Carnegie Moscow Center.

<http://carnegie.ru/2014/07/30/ukraine-and-new-divide/hln1>

allies. On the other side India has good relations with Moscow since the period of the Soviet Union, including considerable Russian military exports.

Unlike the Asian BRICS members, Brazil and South Africa have no territorial conflicts, military confrontations or tensions with neighbouring countries, nor are they involved in a direct geopolitical opposition to the US or another major power.

Also the political influence is unequal among BRICS members. While China and Russia have permanent seats in the UN-Security Council, the other BRICS members don't. As India and Brazil are trying to get such a seat, it will be interesting to see in the future, how China and Russia, who are already members of the club, will handle the issue.⁹

Table 1: Basic indicators for BRICS countries, 2013

	GDP 2013 ¹ in Dollar Parity		GDP 2013 ¹ In Purchasing Power Parity			Populat.	Global Rank	Milit. Expdt.
	Mio. USD	Global Rank		Global Rank	per capita	Mio.		USD Mio. current
China	9.240.270	2	16.161.655	2	6.560	1.357.380	1	188.460
Brazil	2.245.673	7	3.012.934	7	11.690	200.362	5	47.398
Russia	2.096.777	9	3.460.368	6	13.860	143.500	9	87.837
India	1.876.797	10	6.776.098	3	1.570	1.252.140	2	31.456
S. Africa	350.630	33	662.632	27	7.190	52.982	25	4.108

Sources: World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-ranking-Table>

For military expenditures SIPRI: http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database

2.1. Economic differences

With regard to the economic system all BRICS are capitalist countries, and all are following the conventional imperative of quantitative growth for their economic development and have – some more, some less - (neo-)liberal components in their economic strategies. But within this common framework there are differences, out of which the most important are:

- *the degree of state intervention* and state owned enterprises. Here, China is on top and if there are measures of liberalisation they are strategically well calculated and under strict political control. After a period of anarchic transition to capitalism and chaotic liberalisation in the Yeltsin era, the Russian state has in recent years taken over strategically important sectors, in particular in the energy sector. India is gradually liberalising its economy, while Brazil and South Africa are the most open market oriented economies among the BRICS with what could be called “light touch” state intervention;
- *the structure of the economy*. While China has a large and advanced industry with some high tech sectors but still a huge rural sector, India is relying still very much on agriculture with an emerging industry including an important digital sector. Brazil and South Africa are major raw material – agricultural and mining – exporters with few internationally relevant industrial sectors. Russia is somehow in between. There is an industrial base from Soviet times, which, however, needs to be modernised, while

⁹ The final declaration of the first summit in Yekaterinburg 2009 mentions the issue, but remains vague on the details, including the decisive question of the veto right in the security council: „We reiterate the importance we attach to the status of India and Brazil in international affairs, and understand and support their aspirations to play a greater role in the United Nations.“ Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders June 16, 2009, Yekaterinburg.
<http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2009/06/217963.shtml>

there are some high tech sectors (aviation, space and military industries). Export relies to a major part on raw material (natural gas, oil etc.);

- *the social situation.* While the per capita income is the highest in Russia, clearly ahead of Poland and other Eastern EU members, India has with 400 million people living in absolute poverty a big share of poverty, while the middle class is growing. South Africa still suffers from a kind of “social Apartheid,” while China and Brazil have a fast growing middle class and considerable successes in overcoming poverty.

All these differences – political, economic military etc. - create a quite complex and sometimes contradictory pattern of interests and interaction between the BRICS countries, including some potential sources of conflicts.

There is, for instance, the risk, that the traditional pattern of division of labour in trade relations is repeated. In particular Brazil, South Africa and India might get problems with this in the long run. Also between Russia and China this pattern might turn into a disadvantage for Russia in the long run, if the country does not succeed in diversifying and modernising its economy.

Another problem might be the asymmetry between the gigantic size of the Chinese economy, which stands for almost 60% of the overall GDP (in Dollar parity) and the other four. This leads inevitably to a dominant role of China, if there is no counterbalance.

Hence, the benefit that the different countries can draw from the project is different and the intensity of involvement will depend on the benefits. If inequalities increase, some members might drop out. This risk exists particularly for Brazil and South Africa, particularly if it is accompanied by a change in the government.

But all this is not a special problem of the BRICS. All types of international alliances and regional cooperation are confronted with such challenges (see chapter 3 on the EU). Therefore it is worthwhile to throw a glance on what unites the BRICS.

2.2. The common denominator: anti-hegemonial

Behind the background of this political, military, economic and cultural heterogeneity one might ask, why the BRICS have come together. The decisive motivation is explained in the Yekaterinburg declaration and has been repeated throughout the other summits. The BRICS want “*a more democratic and just multi-polar world order based on the rule of international law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making of all states.*”¹⁰

In other words, the BRICS are of the opinion, that the present world order is:

- not democratic (enough),
- unjust and unipolar,
- not based on the rule of law,
- unequal,

and there is a lack of mutual respect, cooperation and collective decision making.

The large majority of international civil society will agree with this analysis. The analysis reflects the hegemonial practices of the US and its European allies – not only but in particular - since the beginning of the *War on Terror*. But it also reflects on the other side the changing balance of power in the world as sketched above. The BRICS want to break the Western power monopoly, and they want more independence from political and economic interference into their internal affairs. They feel that thanks to their increasing potential time is ripe to join efforts, to accelerate the process of transition to a polycentric world with the help of an organised structure. This is the decisive common interest, and it is strong enough, to cooperate in spite of the differences discussed in the previous chapter. The BRICS are an anti-hegemonial project.

¹⁰ Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders June 16, 2009, Yekaterinburg.
<http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2009/06/217963.shtml>

Looking at the economic facts they are right. The relative economic strength of the US and Western Europe has been shrinking considerably in the last two decades and will continue to shrink in the future. For instance, the existing G7 claim to represent the seven strongest economies in the world. But even measured in *Dollar Parity* China and Brazil are stronger than Italy and Canada. Hence, their place would be among the G7, while Italy and Canada would have to drop out. Measured in *Purchasing Power Parity* the changes would even go further. The G7 then would consist of the US, China, India, Japan, Germany, Russia and Brazil. France, the UK, Italy and Canada would drop out (see table 2).

Table 2: The “real” G7 2013

The existing G7		The "real" G7 in \$ parity		The "real" G7 in PPP	
USA	16.768.100	USA	16.768.100	USA	16.768.100
Japan	4.919.563	China	9.240.270	China	16.161.655
Germany	3.730.261	Japan	4.919.563	India	6.776.098
France	2.806.428	Germany	3.730.261	Japan	4.641.373
UK	2.678.455	France	2.806.428	Germany	3.585.206
Italy	2.149.485	UK	2.678.455	Russia	3.460.368
Canada	1.826.769	Brazil	2.245.673	Brazil	3.012.934

Source: World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-ranking-Table>

Interestingly, the BRICS constituted themselves more or less in parallel to the promotion of the G20 to a global leaders forum.¹¹ It was still under the Bush administration, when some weeks after the collapse of Lehman Brothers the US organised the first G20 summit. Although they participated in the G20, the BRICS did not believe that this forum was covering their interests. Also in the IMF, which is controlled by the US, and which is used informally as a kind of executive body for the G20, the BRICS did not see their interests sufficiently represented. At the Fortaleza summit in 2014 they declared: *“We remain disappointed and seriously concerned with the current non-implementation of the 2010 International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms, which negatively impacts on the IMF’s legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness.”*¹² Also for the World Bank, which has the same US-dominated governance structure as the IMF, the BRICS ask for *“more democratic governance structures.”*¹³

Another indicator, why the BRICS are motivated by more than just the size of GDP is the integration of South Africa into the group. Initially South Africa was not a member and joined only in December 2010. If only considerations of economic potential would have played a role, South Africa would not be part of the BRICS. Because in terms of GDP, there are some ten countries ahead of South Africa, among them Mexico, Indonesia, Argentina and Iran. With Nigeria even an African country is clearly ahead of South Africa with a GDP of 521,8 bn. USD compared to 350,6 bn. USD.

But while Nigeria is politically unstable, South Africa has a stable political system and is generally acknowledged – also in the West - as the leading regional power in Sub-Sahara Africa. For the four other BRICS, the presence of an African country therefore is of highly symbolic value. It demonstrates the global outreach of the alliance, which encompasses all five continents. This interest met with some left-leaning views on the international system in the ruling ANC and the South African Communist Party, which is part of the government coalition in Johannesburg.

¹¹ The G20 had initially been set up in 1999 as a consultative body of finance ministers, supervisors and central bankers to discuss issues of the global finance system.

¹² Sixth BRICS Summit – Fortaleza Declaration

<http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23635/Sixth+BRICS+Summit++Fortaleza+Declaration>

¹³ *ibid.*

2.3. Driving forces in the BRICS

An interesting question is, who took the initiative to build the BRICS and who is (are) the driving factor(s) in the alliance. The official BRICS sources give no answer. However, it can be assumed, that it is primarily a Russian-Chinese project. It might be even possible that Russia has played the role of an initiator. But this is only an assumption, which cannot be proved by now. Apart from the fact, that the first BRICS summit in 2009 took place in Russia, there are some structural determinants for such a role of Russia:

As already mentioned above, Russia is the only country with a nuclear second-strike capacity, which it inherited from the Soviet Union. In terms of geo-politics this is an extremely important fact, in particular for the US elites, as it is a restriction for their global leadership. For Washington this had been an unpleasant drop of bitterness in the victory of the Cold War. But as in the aftermath of the dismantling of the Soviet Union, Russia was at the brink of becoming a failed state, this issue was not that much in the forefront. Also, in civil society this issue had been underestimated. But for the strategic reasoning of the US, this was always a crucial point in its relations to Russia.¹⁴

In the 90ies Russia had almost disappeared as an independent actor in the international arena. Towards the end of the Yeltsin presidency, the country had to swallow the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe. With negotiations starting in 1997, the first wave of accessions (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) was completed in March 1999.¹⁵ The defeat of Serbia (a traditional Russian ally since the tsarist era) in the Kosovo war, initiated by NATO in 1998/99, was another culminating point of the Western dominance and the impotence of Russia.

With Putin's first presidency in 2000, Russia entered into a period of recovery and consolidation, first domestically and with relatively high growth rates. Towards the end of the decade the country started to come back into the international arena.

With the tradition of Russia being a big power already in the 19th century and a superpower after World War II it is only logical that Russian elites would earlier or later try to defend more forcefully what they consider to be their national interests. Russia is quasi a "born challenger" for the US supremacy, and the BRICS are one element in the Russian strategy to replace the unilateral US supremacy by a multipolar world order.

Of course, the building of an alliance outside the gravitation of the US lead West would not have functioned without a consensus with China. In economic terms, Chinas potential is almost five times bigger than the Russian economy and its economy is generally more advanced. There can be no doubt, that China would never accept any kind of Russian leadership.

But, China has basically the same interest as Russia to get rid of the US hegemony. China too is a "born challenger" of US-hegemony, although the country kept a relatively low profile in foreign policies in the past, trying to not openly appear as such. The Chinese elites are used to think in long-term historical perspectives, and hence are not in a hurry.

However, it seems that China is now on the way to its coming out as a superpower. When in the case of Syria Beijing was somehow hiding behind Russia and treating Edward Snowden like a hot potato in order to avoid the anger of Obama, directly antagonistic interests with the US are now occurring gradually in the Pacific with territorial conflicts over some small islands as a catalyst. The US-behaviour in the region is confirming this trend by increasing its military presence and to gather allies also economically through a *Pacific Trade and Investment Agreement*, which excludes China.

For the BRICS this means, that the axis Beijing-Moscow is the core of the project and both will serve as driving force. There is a centre and a periphery in the alliance. China and Russia have to gain most from the BRICS. For Russia the BRICS have already now proven to be

¹⁴ See in particular: Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1997): *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York and the same (2012): *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*. New York

¹⁵ The second wave in 2004 brought in: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and in 2009 Albania and Croatia joined.

very useful, when Western sanctions in the context of the Ukraine crisis failed to isolate the country, and Russian former trade relations with the EU could be switched to BRICS countries.

3. The place of the EU in the *Great Game*

Where is the place of the EU in this *Great Game*¹⁶ over the World order?

First of all it must be straightened that the EU is not a nation state like the US, China and all the other countries, but an alliance of 29 nation states with a far reaching economic integration (common market) and some supra national elements such as trade and agricultural policies. The foreign policy is not part of the supra-national arrangements, although there is a commissioner for foreign relations. This has consequences for the behaviour and the impact of the EU in the international arena. Each country maintains its own foreign policy, which in quite some important cases can be very different from each other, if not antagonistic. Important examples for these differences are the non-participation of France and Germany in the US-war against Iraq in 2003, while others, in the first place the UK and the Eastern European countries were eager to be part of Bush's *Coalition of the Willing*. Also, when in 2011 the UN Security Council voted a no-fly zone in Libya, which then was misused for regime change by France, the UK and the US, Germany did not participate.

A similar situation is for other international hotspots, such as the recognition of Palestine, where several countries recognized Palestine – recently Sweden - while others do not. Even in cases, where the EU is directly part and party of a crisis, as in the case of the association treaty with Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia, which appear to be a common foreign policy, it is only a small common denominator, which is challenged by different member states. For instance, Poland and Lithuania provide military assistance to Kiev, while Germany and France don't.

This will not change in a predictable future. At the contrary, in particular the bigger countries, which all have an imperial and colonial past, still follow primarily policies, which are focused on what the respective elites believe to be the national interest. The most prominent example is the UK, which even might leave the EU, while further deepening its special relationship to the US. But even if the UK remains in the EU, the heterogeneity and centrifugal dynamics in all important policy areas will further increase.

Also the economic crisis, which began in 2008 with the financial crash and then, in 2010, turned into a public debt crisis in many member states is not over. Today, the EU is at the brink of deflation. It is unclear, whether the Euro-zone will survive in its present form. Even the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, is considering the exit of Greece as an option. The "Japanese disease" with a long period of stagnation is looming, while everywhere right populist parties are on the rise. In the recent EU elections they got most votes in France, the UK, Belgium and Denmark. In other words, there is political instability coming up. All this will further weaken the standing and the influence of the EU in the international arena.

Behind this background the dream of many people in the EU institutions and in some EU capitals of making the EU a superpower at equal footing with the US and China ("G3") will remain a dream. The realistic options that remain are:

- giving up an autonomous role in the upcoming new world order and gathering behind Washington as a kind of US-satellite in a Western block, or
- remaining an autonomous but regional factor.

For the moment being, it would not be serious to make a forecast, as things are very much in a state of flux.

What does this mean for the EU policies toward the BRICS? The EU will have no common policies for the BRICS. Each member state will develop its own relations to the individual BRICS states, and may even compete with others, for instance for market shares in China or

¹⁶ Historically *Great Game* was the name for the conflict between the British Empire and Russia over the hegemony in Central Asia in the nineteenth century up to the October Revolution.

big strategic infrastructure projects, such as the North-Stream pipeline or railway routes in the context of the Chinese-Russian “Silk Road” projects.

4. Another international system is necessary

A multipolar order is not automatically more democratic, equitable and peaceful as a unipolar system. It can be chaotic, conflict-ridden and bellicose. But as history is contingent and change offers opportunities into different directions, it would be irresponsible for civil society not to try to intervene into the process of transition of the international system.

But there is no reason to take sides on Western countries on grounds of democracy and human rights. For Western governments, and in the first place for the US, the narrative of democracy and human rights has always been instrumentalised for and subordinated to geopolitical purposes. Not to speak about double standards when it comes to torture in Guantanamo, global electronic surveillance through secret service agencies, racism by state institutions or the protection of privileges for TNCs, billionaires and finance capital, or the illegal use of military violence from Vietnam to Iraq. It is simply good, if Argentina gets an unconditional credit to counter the attacks of vulture funds without knuckling down under the IMF conditionality. It is simply good, if Russia can switch over its agriculture imports from Poland and Italy to Brazil, if Washington and Brussels decide that Moscow is the only guilty for the crisis in Ukraine.

The democratisation of the international system and its institutions, the respect of international law as codified in the UN-Charter, political conflict resolution and an equitable world economy are genuine emancipatory proposals. Cooperation must be the fundamental principle, not competition. Otherwise, the big challenges for humanity cannot be met.

But there is no reason neither to believe in the logics of “*the enemy of my enemy is my friend.*” For civil society, human rights, democracy and peaceful development are values in themselves, which cannot be subordinated or even sacrificed for other purposes. And the record of the BRICS countries in that respect is – with differentiated intensity in different countries – problematic.

But a formalistic position of equidistance is no solution, neither. What we need is differentiated approach, case by case. The principal goal of the BRICS to democratize the international system deserves support. In particular if the BRICS really want to strengthen the UN and stick to the principles of the UN-Charter, as they claim in their declarations. To create an alternative to the IMF, the World Bank is good, given that 40 years of reforming the Bretton Woods institutions has not delivered substantial results. But if the *New Development Bank* projects finances projects, by dismissing human rights, democracy and the eco-systems, we cannot keep silent. In particular we have to practice solidarity with autonomous civil society in the respective country in their protest.