

Artigo Dossiê

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22456/2178-8839.97954>

Ver. Conj. Aust. | v.11, n.53 | jan./mar. 2020



THE HISTORY OF BRICS' INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (2009-2019): DISCOURSES, INNOVATION AND SENSITIVITIES

A história das Relações Internacionais dos BRICS (2009-2019): discursos, inovação e sensibilidades

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Introduction

The BRICS is a group of countries formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa that began to operate formally in 2009 as a legitimate, efficient and durable agent of governance in the world order (ACHARYA 2016: 1-27). Scholars all over the world – many of them cited here in this article – have painted the image of the BRICS as an ‘economic colossus’, assuming an underdeveloped intra-bloc cooperation restricted to economic issues. Nonetheless, from an economic starting point, the BRICS has evolved in the last years expanding its cooperation capabilities to a huge array of issues that encapsulates innovation and sensitivity.

A more accurate understanding of BRICS functioning within the world would be drawn from a historical international relations perspective. It helps to discern the advent of structures and processes that goes beyond discourses and reflecting a pluralistic view of world politics. The argument here is that areas such as health, security, and development, for example, have become new and productive arenas of dialogue, as well as loci of sensitive interactions influencing intra-BRICS relations. At the same time, BRICS international relations were not focused on growth-and-prosperity only: it was design-innovation oriented to a pluriversal approach of world order (ESCOBAR 2018).

This article is part of a major intellectual effort to understand the relevance of BRICS for international relations. It aims to stress BRICS's strategic role in promoting a multipolar world order, based on principles

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such as justice, reducing inequalities, and rethinking global governance. Likewise, this study contributes to defying the imperial cognitive worldview (SOUZA SANTOS 2019) imposed by Global North thought. So, it highlights the plurality of worldviews springing from the block and their capability to strengthen the ties between Global South countries.

This article also aims to evaluate historically the main aspects, defining moments, opportunities and challenges faced by the BRICS in building a solid relationship between 2009 and 2019. On the one hand, it has an empirically strong foundation of primary and secondary sources – including news, speeches by leaders, official Itamaraty communications and the most recent scientific studies about the BRICS. Methodologically it is based on Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and Critical Thinking. To organize the qualitative material in a systematic way it defines three main categories of BRICS functioning: narratives, innovation and sensitivities. Looking through the qualitative content gathered and analyzed it is possible to understand countries' political positions and critically analyze primary sources as well as focusing on knowledge production in terms of narratives and sub narratives. This helps to shed some light on BRICS recent history.

On the other hand, Historical International Relations (HIR) focused on views from the other, *force profonde*, the role of Statesman, the power of ideas, values and principles (RENOUVIN 2010; FRANK 2003), makes it possible to reframe contexts and redefine narratives, particularly in two ways: a) critically debating symbolical representations of the BRICS – for instance, 'BRICS as an economic colossus' and 'the end of BRICS'; b) exploring cases of innovation and pointing for a peculiar dynamics of Intra-BRICS relations called 'cooperation under sensitivity'. Likewise, drawing from Koselleck's (2006) concepts of 'spaces of experiences' and 'horizons of expectations' it would be possible to have a deeper understanding about BRICS recent history².

Even though the importance of Chinese and Russian visions about the BRICS, as well as their key role in promoting cooperation and global governance cannot be underestimated, the focus and main contribution of this article is to present a Brazilian perspective on a multi country arrangement. Thus, the argument put forward in this article is that the typical issue-linkage dynamics of an interdependent relation has led to an ambivalent effect: new productive dialogue niches (health, security, development) that have created circumstances of sensitive interactions between the countries, causing controversy and diplomatic disputes that affect bilateral and multilateral ties between BRICS countries.

The article is divided into three parts regarding the main historical movements in BRICS international relations between 2009-2019. The first discusses the narratives of the BRICS, a history of two tales, Brazil's motivations on BRICS and the pluridentity of BRICS as a Global South representative in power politics. The

² By interpreting Koselleck (2006: 306-327) ideas, one can understand 'spaces of experience' as historical composites derived from the set of actions and thoughts transmitted between generations. They are the result of the memories (ideational and practical) of our own life or the lives of others, flourishing on events that can be incorporated into mentalities and memories (individual, institutional, social) and connecting past and present times into possibilities that become reality as well as lessons to be learned. Also, one can understand 'horizon of expectations', in its turn, as a set of facts and events that take place in the present creating possibilities (emotional, affective, behavioral) for the future. Expectations arise on the horizon of the future in many forms such as feelings, imagination, anticipations, referring to what is yet to come. Fears, hopes, anxieties, desires, certainties, are part of this "horizon of expectations".

second part presents an understanding of innovations related to the recent history of the BRICS in the global order, evaluating advances and challenges of the block as a hub of international power. The third part debates sensitivities within BRICS international relations providing diagnostic evidence of the institutional ambivalence created in the last decade and the emerging concept of 'cooperation under sensitivity'.

Narratives about the BRICS

BRICS – a history of two tales

Language is power (HUNG NG; DENG2017), and the use of language to describe BRICS relations in the world became an important political tool to persuade social and political audiences about a specific matter and feature: the rise or decline of the BRICS. Language is used to justify references in favor of or against the block and even to deceive the public in general on the real powerfulness of the arrangement. Jim O'Neill's study on "economic opportunity in the BRICs" triggered an increased interest in the BRICS as a subject of research (see Google Trends). Otherwise, this blurred idea of a 'broken BRICS' (SHARMA 2012) or the "BRICS fallacy" (PANT 2013) became a frequently act of speech of analysts. In fact, language helps to put emphasis on certain attributes and mark the kind of image one intends to build about that specific international agent.³

The first of the two tales on BRICS' history of international relations concerns the myopic idea of the BRICS as an exclusively *economic colossus*. A narrative created to demonstrate the combined economic power of the group of countries, as well as their ability to rival the established liberal order. Some analysts – all cited here in the bibliographical recollection of this article – have seen the BRICS as 'friends with benefits', economic allies and partners for some endeavors. This part of the narrative is reinforced by the tendency of the BRICS countries to push forward global growth, keeping their position as relatively reliable commercial partners. Another example is a focus on lasting and successful BRICS structures such as a "BRICS-led Development Bank" and a Business Forum that has brought together business and government representatives from the five countries. The economic colossus is keen on expanding and diversifying trade and investment and stimulating the identification of new investment and business opportunities (RODRIGUES 2014; CHIN 2014; PELFINE 2015; SILVA 2017; MARTINS 2018; RAMOS 2018).

The second of the two tales of BRICS' history of international relations concerns the *end of BRICS*. A narrative constructed to raise doubts about the feasibility of the group and to induce thinking about the (in)viability of the arrangement in becoming a global power. On this tale, BRICS countries act as deviant actors, a rogue stumbling block on the road to liberal Western triumphalism. A narrative marked by language attributes related to the death of the BRICS by highlighting the domestic challenges, like political and economic crisis, democratic fragilities, authoritarian attitudes, corruption and recession. Similarly, this tale looks to a post-Western arrangement as a byproduct of revisionist foreign policies and unmeasured ambitions

³ For an in-depth philosophical discussion of the nexus between power, language and images see the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida e Ludwig Wittgenstein. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Resumo dos cursos do Collège de France (1970-1982)*. Kindle Ed. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar. WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Investigações Filosóficas*. 9ª Ed. São Paulo: Vozes, 2014. DERRIDA, Jacques. *Gramatologia*. Trad. Miriam Schnaiderman e Renato J. Ribeiro. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1973. WATKIN, Christopher. *Jacques Derrida. Great Thinkers. A Serie*. New York: P&R Publishing, 2017.

of creating a new world order. This tale of the end of the BRICS intent to link the challenges imposed by the emergence of other countries in West Africa and Southeast Asia, with the ability to create markets and to attract investors, as a path to BRICS replacement (WRIGHT 2015; AMANHÃ 2016; DEFESANET 2016, FINANCIAL TIMES 2016; ALBAWABA 2018; FORUM 2019).

Brazilian visions about the BRICS

Those two tales would certainly influence Brazilian visions about the BRICS, but not in an indisputable fashion. One of the major contributions of the BRICS on the Brazilian perspective for international politics may be precisely to demonstrate that “diversity is not an impediment to concerted action, but, on the contrary, enriches each country's perceptions” (MRE, CT 89941). Three components of the international identity of Brazil worked to foster an alliance with Russia, China, India and South Africa: (1) the quest for universalism in the international arena, which balanced the strong south-Americanist emphasis within Brazilian foreign policy since 2000; (2) diversification of alliances, motivating and justifying a Brazilian decision to be part of a group of so different countries; and (3) the formation of strategic partnerships as the cornerstone for ensuring long-term gains for Brazil in the world (LAFER 2001; GEHRE 2012).

Motivations for Brazil and its partners to build on the BRICS political project were multiple. One of the most obvious was related to increased cooperation and trade, reinforcing new centers of power, and contributing to reducing dependencies and external vulnerabilities. Another was to design a project based on an institutionalization capable of coping with very different capabilities along with striking domestic differences. Brazilian visions on BRICS have been favorable regardless of the diversity between countries on issues like degrees of social mobility and demographic dynamics, market economy model (production and consumption), human rights and environmental policy making. From a Brazilian perspective, the task was to fulfill the prophecy of becoming partners on an endeavor of changing the axis of international politics from the North to the South, even though they are geographically distant countries (ROUSSEFF 2012).

Nevertheless, the Brazilian vision about the BRICS was profoundly affected by the political mood and the government of the moment. Between 2009 and 2015 the leadership of the Workers Party (PT) favored the option of the BRICS as a global projection platform to strengthen a multipolar international order while creating opportunities for Brazil. Since 2016, the power shift within the governments of Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2018-2019) created a sterile, and unrefined conception of international projection: simply by the mimetics of liberalizing conceptions of the Global North and their solutions to achieve development (GALVÃO 2019).

More recently, Brazil was invested into the BRICS Presidency (on January 1st, 2019) becoming responsible for leading the agenda formation, which included holding about 100 meetings in the different tracks of diplomacy. The priorities of the Brazilian presidency are science, technology & innovation, digital economy and combating transnational illicit acts. Brazil would also continue to value the New Development Bank (NDB). In all these areas, the Brazilian diplomatic move was to achieve concrete results that could entangle even more the five countries in initiatives with tangible consequences. Another two areas of

intensification of intra-BRICS cooperation were related to health and energy – on the grounds that they are closely related to common challenges of the world. (SERE CT, Nr. 110374, 2019). A setback was related to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) listed in the 2030 Agenda: a diplomatic priority that is facing some domestic resistances during the Brazilian Presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.

BRICS pluridentity design

Once one realizes that the history of international relations of BRICS are made of two predominate tales and some national visions (here emphasizing a Brazilian perspective) it turns out to be more plausible to understand that the BRICS settled in the last decade on a design oriented to survive in a *pluriverse* (ESCOBAR, 2018). Even though the literature tried to categorize a multifaceted phenomenon with narrow-minded concepts – sweeping away the intrinsic and ambivalent complexity and singularity – this article intends to reorganize some current ideas focusing on BRICS historical experiences and its multiple roles played in international relations: alignment on economics, alliance on high politics and security, club in high finance and strategic partnership for social themes. The result is an image not of a singular global actor but a pluridentity agent: empowered by the ability to handle international dilemmas and problems globally (ACHARYA, 2016) as well as of playing in multiple arenas and flowing in multiple bases of identity, a phenomenon one should call *pluridentity*.

The BRICS design is related to the profound transformation experienced by the international order in recent decades. After the end of the Cold War's bipolarity in 1991 and the rise of a unipolar moment in the 1990s, the international system has envisaged less accurate contours concerning the distribution of power and the capacity of the hegemon in promoting peace and stability. Even though the process of securitization has overwhelmed the post-September 11 international agenda, relevant decisions on the new financial architecture or the construction of a post-2015 development agenda could not be taken unilaterally. The BRICS design would then reaffirm the contribution of the so-called emerging powers and the possible return of a Great-power politics stressed by a “very language of geopolitics” (MONTEIRO 2014; RODRIGUEZ 2014; CONING 2017; COLBY; MITCHELL 2020).

From a realist point of view (SNYDER 1997; MORGENTHAU 2000, 352-353) typical alliances are built on a dynamic range of interests and a variety of purposes, which depend on comprehensive policies and measures of the parties to make the alliance operational, creating feelings of alignment and opposition as well as intra BRICS competition (CHATUVERDI; SAHA, 2017) Once BRICS countries were making a reinterpretation of the role of powerful institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, they used that alignment to foster a political alliance. As an alliance over economic foundations, the BRICS tried also to respond firmly to security issues on the conflicts in Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Ukraine; and on the nuclear issue in Iran (ABDENUR, 2016).

From a World System perspective, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa searched for patterns to enhance cooperation in a distinctive institutional setting driven by “geopolitical aspirations” (WALLERSTEIN, 2016). They tried to establish an alignment in the economic field, challenging the status quo

of the traditional global zones of accumulation (USA, Europe and Japan) by creating new polarities with the capacity to generate and diffuse economic growth on an anti-hegemonic fashion (FRANK 2006; FERNANDES et al., 2015, 225).

From a constructivist point of view, it is possible to understand the formation of interests of BRICS countries addressing a non-traditional security agenda, on water, food, energy agriculture, climate and gender, as well as global health problems such as epidemics of dengue fever and other infectious diseases.⁴ Finally, following a Grotian perspective of IR, BRICS got involved in the claim to change the international order, on values and norms, aiming at the reform of the Security Council of the United Nations (UNSC) by making it a subject constantly present on Summit declarations. The idea is to make both UNSC and the global governance more representative, effective and efficient to respond legitimately and appropriately to global challenges (WEISS 2016).

Another dimension of BRICS design is allowing the group to behave as a club, for example, in the recent creation of the New Development Bank (NBD). A club has a characterization of selectiveness and exclusivity, filtering the entrance of new members and assuring that the foundational basis can be preserved. Clubs can be formal or informal, flexible and less institutionalized. The subtleties of an informal club have permitted members of the BRICS to operate and give 'more attention to areas in which there is shared common interests and efforts to make progress in them, while abstaining from addressing issues where there are underlying international tensions' (COOPER; FAROOQ, 2015, p. 21-24).

Moreover, based on its functioning in the last decade, one could see three types of relationships going on inside the BRICS: axis relations, triangulation and strategic partnerships. Axis of bilateral or multilateral relations can be generated on global or sub-global levels, creating gravitational centers within a region or between different regions of the planet. Triangulation covers regularities in the history of international relations on the relationship between three different international power gradients, which mutually affect their choices and strategies. The use of triangulation commonly explains the balancing of power, interdependence and dependence between the three sides of the triangle. Finally, a strategic partnership is a social arrangement made based on a historical sense of opportunity and a long-term vision, densification of the reflection of the economic and trade relations, the expansion of high-level contacts between foreign ministers and presidents, as well as political decisions with high strategic component content involving both companies in a complex web of images and interests that affect their daily lives (LESSA 1998; GEHRE 2012).

BRICS evolved in the History of International Relations based on dynamics of axis relations, triangulations and strategic partnerships, acquiring a *pluridentity* on the global arena. Despite the fact of being geographically distant, they could trigger a special alliance that is changing not only the power distribution in the system, but the essence of global society. BRICS took roots in international relations profiting from a population bonus, absorbing in the market economy a new wave of consumers and converging social mobility toward a new middle class, and molding the relationship of leaders, governments and societies of the five

⁴ For a more detailed appraisal of different themes of cooperation see the BRICS Policy Center Papers (BPC Papers).

countries. Ideological, political and geographical distances have not disabled the BRICS “strategic patience” (CONING 2017) to settle sentimental and instrumental approaches to influence the global order.

BRICS as Global South representative

Another narrative, more conscious of BRICS acting in world politics, contextualizes the rise of regional powers such as China, India, South Africa and Brazil as part of a historical process of changing ideas and concepts. Once labeled as ‘underdeveloped’, ‘developing’, ‘Third World’ or ‘Peripheral’ countries, because of their differences on levels of prosperity, geographical locations, cultural and religious conviction and sharing a colonial past of exploitation by old and new powers, they acquired an image “mostly defined in negative terms, namely by what it is not [yet]” (SPIES 2019).

Otherwise, the idea of a ‘Global South’ is being used to change this negative image and increase the visibility of South-South relations and to rethink the label of dependent nations (whether of various external inflows such as capital, technology, know-how), open space for human rights, and climate justice movements, as much as to solidarity ties created around the right to food, energy and water for local poor populations. The Global South encapsulates narratives and processes related to different geographical, political, cultural and economic bases, forged in anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic fights against inequalities by people: leaders whom, for decades, built bridges between the global and local. The Global South encapsulates the main dynamics of the world politics in the 21st Century such as proxy wars, counterterrorism, tourism, migration, sustainable development, hunger and poverty alleviation policies.

As a Global South representative, the BRICS consciously battles for a plural world order and against the “imposition of a single set of norms and standards” (SALZMAN 2019: 30). The demise of Washington under Donald Trump’s presidency naturally increases the space of experience for the idea of ‘Global South’ as a powerful road map for States and non-state actors to perform important alliances between agents that were once deemed peripheral, catalyzing a “boomerang-effect strategy” from human rights groups around the world (COLLECTION S/D). Therefore, the idea of Global South created both an operational framework and a *leitmotif* to engender political stances willing to break with traditional relations of asymmetry and unequal and undemocratic diplomatic practices of North-South cooperation (DADOS; CONNELL 2012; MARQUES; SPANAKOS, 2014).

Global South as a political belief or political concept creates a communication channel of these nations with the international society, boosting attention to the multiple voices of the ‘many worlds’, (de la CADENA; BLASER, 2018). BRICS has become, then, symbolically the fore runner against “patterns of wealth, privilege, and [under]development across broad regions” (DADOS; CONNELL 2012). A more optimistic narrative would regard BRICS as the natural representative of the Global South in the global order of this Century, specially due to common shared constitutive aspects: a) similar challenges of development, heritage of underdeveloped Third World nations; b) unequivocal confidence in multilateral relations; c) global commitments in critical agendas (energy, water, food and climate change governance); and d) the instrumentalization of domestic strength (rising middle class and growing consumer market). Moreover, the

exercise of South-South cooperation diplomacy has become a crucial tool for BRICS in the quest for space and autonomy in the current global order, for example, in dealing with crisis such as the climate emergency the world is facing nowadays (DOWNIE; WILLIAMS, 2018; BARROS-PLATIAU et al. 2018).

Innovations related to BRICS design

Between 2009 and 2019, BRICS institutionalization process was marked by efforts to build designing capabilities to innovate in international politics. According to Keohane (1969) institutionalization would be a “process by which the international organization becomes differentiated, durable, and autonomous”. Differentiation from other globally institutionalized arrangements, specifying their international social role; resilience on changes of a myriad of causes either in the system, States or societies; autonomy in order to set norms and influence the international order. Therefore, one could understand institutionalization as a historical process of establishing routines aiming to enforce decision-making process and rule formation that could or could not edify an organization formerly constituted, but that make flourish ‘spaces of experiences’ and ‘horizons of expectations’ for the agents connected to that arrangement.

Innovations related to BRICS design came through ‘spaces of experiences’ or places fulfilled with routines, procedures and contacts between decision-makers, technicians, academics, entrepreneurs and social agents. Innovations on institutional design are fostering intra-BRICS cooperation to face global politics challenges (disorderly migration fluxes, atrocious refugee camps, perennial killing localized wars in Africa and the Middle East), more than conventional narratives proposes. BRICS pluridentity affects the institutions responsible of creating, maintaining and changing the world order, offering new political and moral grounds, something that is highlighted by the critics about the kind of order we are under.).

One set of innovations are related to changes in governance standards and international institutionalization. The BRICS have created a bridge between two dimensions of international society: on the one hand, questioning standards of governance and institutionalization of global policies on issues such as trade, security and finance; on the other, managing the various interests of each country in their regions of origin to deal with the persistent power inequalities between rich and poor, developed and developing countries.

Other set of innovation came across the evolution of BRICS from an investment portfolio to an institutionalized arrangement with multiple interests. Instead of following a logic of spillover (STUNKEL 2015), from economics to other areas, the tendency of expansion of cooperation was more a *bricolage strategy*: building a single path based on different strategies of each partner by advancing on multiple fronts of intra-block relations and stimulating multilateralism, commonalities and shared concerns. Beyond investment opportunities, BRICS countries were “exercising power opportunities” (FONSECA, 2011, 14). BRICS strategic design core would be to reduce economic and technological external vulnerabilities through reorganization of global order against a reinforcement in the West designed international hierarchy (GUIMARAES, 2005).

Furthermore, BRICS innovation capability is based on its substance, defined by multiple dimensions of acting such as geopolitics, economics, social policies, as well as its culture and historical trajectories. BRICS

innovated to surpass the negative image of a block unable to reach 'consensus' on values and long-term projects. On the one hand, differences become 'possibility of cooperation' especially in the intra-BRICS relations facilitating countries engagement in a myriad of topics of low and high politics in 21st Century. On the other, disparities inside the group indeed brought some difficulties, but do not affected the horizon of expectations for the five countries keeping working together in international politics (FONSECA 2013, 18-29; TEIXEIRA, 2011).

In fact, BRICS' arrangement gained momentum in their economic, commercial and financial discussions, facing together the cyclothymic crises of world economy and the challenges of international politics. BRICS design sent a powerful message to the world: there will be a new locus of legitimacy in international relations. According to Adam Watson (2009, 17), a more closely involvement of independent states with each other, avoiding operating alone and searching to cooperate with allies, tend to rise a certain degree of legitimacy, which will modify their behavior. In this sense, BRICS' leadership decides to increase the meetings in multiple areas looking to reflect national views, concerns and desires. Indeed, it was a smart power strategy to congregate traditional agendas such as science and technology, security, energy, agriculture, commerce and finances along with non-traditional agendas, such as academic forum, health, labor and social protection, statistics, population and development, and youth, to made them 'hot spots' of cooperation.

Beyond no doubt, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserves Arrangement (ACR) are some of the most important innovations that sprung from BRICS international relations (COOPER 2018). The NDB would invest mainly within BRICS countries in infrastructure, sustainable development, health care, aging of population and other demands of their population, especially the middle class – not excluding the possibility to invest in other countries in the future (SUCHODOLSKI; DEMEULEMEESTER, 2018). The NDB has been acting similarly to other multilateral development banks on lending procedures, having approved, until 2018, 30 projects with a total commitment of USD 8.1 billion and disbursements reaching USD 650 million. During 2018, NDB accounted for 17 approved projects, representing a commitment of USD 4.7 billion. The Bank's capital of USD 5.1 billion has been "prudently invested" reaching a yield of USD 72 million in 2018 (compared to USD 31 million in 2017 and USD 4 million in 2016).⁵

Another important feature is the rating obtained from risk assessment agencies.⁶ In terms of market fundraising, by 2016, 3 billion renminbi (RMB) would have been raised and by 2019 another RMB 3 billion. There are prospects for transactions on bonds in US dollar, South African rand (ZAR) and rubles (RUB) in 2019, while Indian rupias (RUP) and Brazilian Reais (BRL) bonds would be expected by 2020. The political environment around the NBD was booming in the last years. Among its main objectives BRICS representatives are expecting to reach a portfolio of approved projects of USD 15 billion; intensifying local currency lending;

⁵ In addition to the central office in Shanghai, China, the NDB is functioning on regional offices bases: the African Regional Center (ARC), is already operating in Johannesburg since August 2017; the Americas Regional Office are being set up in Sao Paulo and Brasilia; the Moscow office is scheduled to start operations in 2019; and the Indian one in early 2020.

⁶ Standard & Poor's rated the NDB as AA + for long-term loans and A-1 + for short term loans; Fitch, has rated AA + for long term and F1 + for short term. Both agencies awarded the highest rating in the short-term category, only calling the attention for the small number of NDB member countries.

starting equity investments; and continuing the implementation of low-cost and rugged technology platforms (CONBRAS Nr. 00075, 2019).

Another innovation of the BRICS is related to tactics to deal with their international image. Once the BRICS acquired its own international identity it would design a specific international image, a kind of footprint that each regional bloc or alliance leaves from its constitution and role in international relations. First, the group was not designed to be anti-Western, even though its international image is strongly influenced by Chinese market socialism and the so called Russian illiberal democracy (ZAKARIAS, 2011), issues that cause diplomatic discomfort and political biases. The BRICS international image was designed to be 'Global South-liked' as part of a new geostrategic conception of the world. In this sense, the choice of South Africa to join the arrangement complied with the relevant task to expand its regional portfolio performance, while giving a more global range for the block (STUENKEL 2015).

Second, there are an ongoing debate on how to attract other countries that would join the arrangement in a 'mating strategy', what was contemplated when speaking of a 'BRICS +' with countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, Egypt, Venezuela and Argentina as partners. In fact, BRICS 'non-member engagement strategy follows the guidelines set out in paragraph 6 of the Sanya Declaration (2011): *"We are open to increasing engagement and cooperation with non-BRICS countries, in particular emerging and developing countries, and relevant international and regional organizations"*.

For instance, regional dialogues were open between BRICS leaders with their South American and African counterparts. A possible outcome is the creation of a BRICS-Africa Council to promote trade and investment between BRICS members and African countries, enhancing international dialogue and cooperation for the promotion of peace, security, social progress and sustainable development (BRASEMB Cairo 00496, 2017).

Other subject on BRICS expansion strategy is about possible criteria for inviting external partners to the 'BRICS +' initiatives, such as: a) connections with major regional integration initiatives; b) balancing participation by different regions; c) creating 'sectoral partnerships' with like-minded countries on various topics on the international agenda. Moreover, on the theme of expanding the number of NDB member countries, Russia and South Africa understand it as part of a political process of inclusion of new members and which should be done by invitation, not application. The inclusion of new members would also entail a revision of the shareholding formula and possible differentiation between countries that are eligible and not able to borrow, topics on which there was no consensus. Finally, another relevant political movement is one of China's request from the other BRICS countries to make the New Development Bank's plea for observer status at the UNGA feasible (CONBRAS Nr. 00075, 2019).

In sum, the international image of the BRICS encapsulates an idea of 'forward-looking': to innovate looking ahead by developing medium and long-term strategies consistently with its uniqueness; operating as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in a gradual and pragmatic manner; reflecting aspirations on openness, solidarity and mutual assistance; based on principles of inclusivity and non-confrontation (SERE CT 95230, 2014).

Sensitivities on BRICS International Relations

A set of historical processes points out to some sensitivities⁷ as part of this decade of international relations of BRICS countries. Sensitivities are completely related to 'horizons of expectations', acknowledging dynamics and processes of expansion of themes, tracks of cooperation and approaches considered politically relevant in BRICS recent history. First, there are systemic sensitivities related to a great game of power politics. On the one hand, the rupture between Russia and the West in the context of the Crimean crisis, the Syrian War and US elections rose some concerns on the effects of sharp power into democracies (NYE, 2018). An atmosphere of uneasiness and fear of foreign intervention in South America was expressed by the Russian ambassador when he expressed concern about the escalation of violence in Venezuela on the date set for the delivery of humanitarian aid regarding the political and economic crisis of Nicolas Maduro government (BRASEMB Madri, Nr. 00189, 2019).

In addition, the intensification of a commercial war between China and the imbalance of economic power within the block had already flagged that China is using egotistically BRICS diplomatic tracks and institutions to achieve specific goals (BECARD et al., 2015). In effect, the more evident the interdependence with China became the more urgent is the calling on how to deal with that 'sinodependency'. For example, the impact of a stronger slowdown in Chinese growth would demand Brazil to be prepared to diversify their 'trading partners and expanding their export baskets, increasing their competitiveness and deepening sub regional integration schemes'. That would favor South America's trade convergence if the UNASUL was still active. The other alternative in a Chinese downsize were to conform new regional supply chains, free trade agreements and increased trade with Russia and India, "countries with equally promising markets" (BRASEMB Caracas Nr. 00482, 2015).

Secondly, there are normative and ideational sensitivities. The lack of a common ideology or a sense of homogeneity – which would facilitate convergence of interest in regional arrangements – tends to constraint dynamics of deepening the block before the established international order (SINHA, 2015). So, the intentions of building a development agenda "universal and integrated with poverty eradication as a central and overarching goal" (DECLARAÇÃO 2014) lost its impetus since 2016 due to a more pragmatic approach on commercial and financing issues on the governments of Temer and Bolsonaro.

Thirdly, there are cultural sensitivities related to national singularities. Since BRICS has been cooperating based on cultural dialogue and diversity respect it is understandable that internal conflicts of values could disturb intra block relations. If one grabs some of the themes on population and development like women empowerment, sexual and reproductive rights as well as racial equality, it is hard to see a consensus emerging from a negotiation between countries with such unlike public policies in those areas (AGENDA 2015). Cultural sensitivities result in disputes on language and conceptual elaboration of official

⁷ Sensitivity could be conceptualized for this study as set of themes, issue-areas and agendas with a high potential to trigger social and political reactions, needing to be treated very carefully to not cause diplomatic embarrassments. For more on the concept of vulnerability and sensitivity see Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. **Power and Interdependence**: World Politics in Transition, third edition, Boston: Little-Brown, 1989.

documents and would cause a kind of diplomatic discomfort on subjects like human rights and freedom. Nevertheless, disturbance does not mean disruption and the cooperation will continue on the grounds of sensitivities ties.

Likewise, sensitivities are present in the interactions of foreign and domestic politics of the five countries. Russia, Brazil and South Africa are dependent on natural resources, facing troubles on growing, competitiveness and corruption. In fact, Russian ‘Crony Economy’ is based on corruption bounds, friendly enterprises and financial safe havens abroad. China’s gigantic economic growth based on statism play against sustainable growth and neglect much of the liberal international norms. India insufficient investment on diplomatic power projection tools is related to a domestic scenario of inequality and poverty. Brazilian tendency to criminalize social movements, in a society fueled by conventionalism, generate waves of shitstorm on the internet and hostility toward migrants and African-derived religions. Similarly, Russia and Chinese authoritarianism enforces political repression with nationalist propaganda and control over social actors. India is surrounded by protests on recent identity politics; and South Africa struggle surpass stagnation of social and economic advances after the Apartheid. (HAN, 2018; METHA 2018; RELATÓRIO LUZ 2019; ASLUND 2019; CONWAY-SMITH 2019; VNR 2019).

Specifically, a set of sensitivities concerns the inclusion of non-state actors as active participants in the alliance institutionalization process. The growing demand for the participation of workers, organizations and social movements, especially in specific forums and parallel to official meetings, to life the concept of ‘BRICS in the People’s Perspective’ (RODRIGUEZ 2014, 14). That BRICS singularity – or a plural sentiment of belonging shared by all five – is responsible to endorse the partnership to carry on agendas, themes and specific forums of global society. The so-called ‘BRICS of the People’ is preoccupied with development issues, drawing from tactics of vigorous engagement in terms of support government projects; constructive influence over national agendas in a two-level game similar dynamic; and active participation in specialized international forums. Once non-state actors use to compose official delegations in BRICS events they tend to profit from domestic demands and debates into negotiation table as well as bringing back home some experiences, ideas and propositions of norm changing.

Final considerations

The main objective of this paper was to capture and explain three significative historical movements of BRICS during its first decade of existence: narratives, innovations and sensitivities. Also, it intended to expand the studies on BRICS far beyond economic issues, advancing a conceptual formulation, updating the research agenda in International Relations, assessing critically BRICS foreign policies formulations, and acknowledging the plurality of worldviews. Consequently, one could understand that the BRICS is more than ideology, BRICS international relations is about power in global politics.

Some of the findings of this research encapsulate the recent History of BRICS’ International Relations. First, the BRICS would be a special kind of partnership established in peacetime, supported by multiple areas of cooperation, working for interdependent-imperfect triangulations and designed for strategic partnerships

between its members, capable of coping with multiple sensitivities. The institutionalization process of BRICS helped to bring acceptance before the global society, making it clear that the group was not designed to be anti-Western.

Second, the type of relationship established between the BRICS countries, bilaterally or multilaterally, generates a new international identity both for individual members and for the group, which ultimately affects the immediate geographical surroundings. Moreover, it can generate tacit alignments in other arenas, create new niches of common interests, mitigate anarchy and, above all, enable the group to influence the making of global order in the 21st Century.

Third, by looking through specific areas of cooperation, we could capture a synthesis concept of BRICS dynamics within the global politics: 'cooperation under sensitivity'. In fact, centralized governments, populist political regimes, illiberal democracies, corruption and profound social inequalities contaminates BRICS' image, but not undermining cooperation. Some of the many challenges to the consolidation of BRICS as a global agent have been converted into opportunities by the governments as institutional culture of the block and part of the ongoing negotiating processes.

Fourth, the implementation of innovations, such as the NDB and the ACR, are being facilitated by the design historically acquired by the BRICS in the following aspects: a) because it has been built over a culture of pragmatism, leaving aside ideological restraints; b) it was thought to emphasized similarities and played down differences, allowing members of the club to pursue common goals and reducing the odds of defection; c) its main focus on infrastructural projects is attractive both to members and non-members of the BRICS, increasing the group's capability to achieve consensus on projects expenses as well as calling the attention of other countries on BRICS economic power.

Fifth, some of the sensitivities exist on the systemic level, related to a great game of power politics, while others are more normative, ideational and culturally based ones. Singularities creates questions about BRICS' institutionalization levels and raises a myriad of challenges concerning the interrelation of domestic and foreign policies. Finally, a set of sensitivities arise as non-state actors actively pressure for participation on decision-making process of BRICS.

Particularly to Brazil, BRICS became a solid platform of internationalization and a way to influence the establishment and changes in international standards. Despite the cohesion problems of the group, not only for the Chinese predominance, the incompatibility of different political regimes and the strikingly different models of development (production, consumption, import and export) this narrative had become epiphenomenal, once for Brazilian governments the BRICS creates spaces of experience and horizons of expectations to influence the transition to a more equitable order, inducing the redistribution of power in the global arena.

The History of BRICS' International Relations is one of a variety of tales, competing narratives and silences. It is based on diversity as a prominent feature of BRICS societies and populations; it is about the global relevance of the Global South in innovating on norms and institutions; it is much more complex than the Global North narratives attributes to them. In fact, the BRICS seems more like a unicorn, seemingly rare

and hard to define or classify that requires a more in-depth study of its constitution, dynamics, designs and functioning.

Finally, the History of BRICS' International Relations is not reflected in the narratives presented in the IR field of studies and contrasts with the low level of mutual knowledge between their populations. New themes and agendas such as population and development, global health, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality remain silent, despite the analytical richness that could provide for the BRICS Global History.

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*Recebido em 05 de novembro de 2019.
Aprovado em 28 de janeiro de 2020.*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the main historical movements in BRICS international relations from 2009 to 2019: (1) the emergence of narratives about success and failure of the BRICS; (2) the capability of BRICS to promote innovations in the global order, and the responsiveness of BRICS to an array of themes under the umbrella of the concept of 'cooperation under sensitivity'; (3) new productive dialogue niches (health, security, development) in BRICS international relations creating circumstances of sensitive interactions between the countries, causing controversy and diplomatic edges that affected bilateral and multilateral ties between BRICS countries. Methodologically, it draws from multiple approaches that combine Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), Critical Thinking and a historical international relations perspective, based on an empirically strong foundation of primary and secondary sources – including news, speeches by leaders, official Brazilian Foreign Office (Itamaraty) telegrams, and the more recent scientific studies about the BRICS.

Keywords: BRICS, Historical International Relations, Global Governance.

RESUMO

O artigo discute os principais movimentos históricos das relações internacionais do BRICS entre 2009 e 2019: o surgimento de narrativas sobre o sucesso e o fracasso do BRICS; a capacidade do BRICS de promover inovações na ordem global e a capacidade de resposta do BRICS a uma variedade de temas, o que reflete-se no conceito de “cooperação sob sensibilidade”. Novos nichos de diálogo produtivo (saúde, segurança, desenvolvimento) nas relações internacionais do BRICS criaram circunstâncias de interações sensíveis entre os países, causando controvérsia e rugas diplomáticas que afetaram os laços bilaterais e multilaterais entre os países do BRICS. Metodologicamente, ele se baseia em múltiplas abordagens que combinam Análise Qualitativa de Conteúdo (QCA), Análise de Política Externa (APF), Pensamento Crítico e uma perspectiva histórica de relações internacionais, com base em forte empiria e uso de fontes primárias e secundárias - incluindo notícias, discurso das autoridades e telegramas oficiais do Itamaraty e os estudos científicos mais recentes sobre o BRICS.

Palavras-chave: BRICS, Relações Internacionais Históricas, Governança Global.

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