

## International Relations Theory and the BRICS

### Phenomenon

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### Abstract

This article examines the BRICS phenomenon through the prism of several International Relations theories. Particularly, power transition theory, soft power and peaceful coexistence concepts, the theory of “global regionalism” and status theories are reviewed. Each of them suggests its own theoretical interpretation of the BRICS phenomenon, as well as its own vision of this group’s role in world politics and economy. It is safe to assume that despite limitations of these theories each of them has some explanatory power. Being used together they can be helpful for studying - in an interdisciplinary way - a complex phenomenon, such as the BRICS. A number of modern theories hold that, along with the pursuit of purely material and pragmatic interests, the BRICS countries actively use this integration association to strengthen their positions in the world arena and elevate their international status.

It should be noted that the BRICS was rather successful in presenting itself as a new model of world order which is a serious alternative to the existing one dominated by the West. It is based on the principles of cooperation, mutual respect and balance of interests, rather than dictate, discrimination, hierarchy and balance of power. It is too early to ascertain that a principally new type of an international institution was born within the BRICS format. However, there is no doubt that some positive experience has already been accumulated by this forum, and that this grouping has some good prospects for the future. For this reason, it will remain of considerable interest for International Relations theory.

**Keywords:** BRICS, International Relations Theory, alternative world order

### Introduction

From the very beginning, the BRICS intergovernmental forum was in the world academic community’s research focus. Despite its relatively young age, the BRICS already has a rather rich historiography in which several kinds of work can be distinguished. The first category includes publications on the BRICS’ history, including its sources and evolution over the time (Korshunov, 2013; Lukyanov, 2011; Nadkarni & Noonan, 2013; Simha, 2013; Toloraya, 2011 and 2014; Wolfe, 2008). In particular, researchers were interested in the motives of the founding States when they joined the grouping. This type of work was characteristic of the early stage in the study of the BRICS phenomenon.

The most typical research on the BRICS is done by economists who were interested in

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the study of the economic potential of individual BRICS countries, their impact on global economic and financial processes, and their cooperation with each other in the fields of economics, trade, finance, environmental protection and so on (Glinkin, 2014; Leksyutina, 2017; Nadkarni & Noonan, 2013; Toloraya, 2014; Toloraya & Chukov, 2016; Toloraya, Yurtaev & Ajdrus, 2016). In particular, a wide range of studies is devoted to the BRICS countries' strategies aimed to attract foreign direct investment to ensure their dynamic development. Economists also focus on the comparison of the aggregate economic power of the Group of 7 (G7) and the BRICS, as well as on the study of 'correlation of forces' between these two informal groups (Korshunov, 2013; Kuzmin, 2013; Okuneva, 2012; Panova, 2013).

Very few works examined the BRICS development as a special mechanism of interstate cooperation, including its ability to initiate changes in the global economic governance system (Fulquet, 2015; Glinkin, 2014; Leksyutina, 2016 and 2017; Okuneva, 2012; Toloraya, 2011 and 2014; Toloraya & Chukov, 2016; Toloraya, Yurtaev & Ajdrus, 2016; BRICS: New Configurations of Global Power, 2015).

Research that tries to interpret the BRICS theoretically as an embryo of an alternative economic and political world order is even less common (De Coning et al., 2015; Fulquet, 2015; Konyshev, Nocen & Sergunin, 2017; Stuenkel, 2014a and 2014b). It should be noted that the BRICS phenomenon requires not only applied analysis, but also theoretical comprehension. Theoretical reflection helps to avoid limitations of a purely empirical explanation of the nature, mechanisms and perspectives of the evolution of the BRICS. Is the BRICS just another institution of interstate cooperation which fits into a system of already existing structures, or is it a fundamentally different mode of international relations that can seriously change the present-day world politics? What drives the BRICS countries' policies? Can the BRICS group become an alternative to the domination of the Western powers, which is formalized in the present system of international institutions and regimes? Will this institution provide fundamentally new conditions which may lead to the development of international cooperation as opposed to power politics pursued by the U.S. and its allies? Can the BRICS be considered a new mechanism of global governance, or is it nothing more than a temporary/short-lived intergovernmental arrangement?

With no ambitions to attack all above questions, this study examines how the main International Relations theories (IRTs) interpret the BRICS phenomenon. The goal is not only to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of these theories, but also to identify their heuristic potential for studying such a complex phenomenon as the BRICS.

This study is based on the assumption that the BRICS is a promising integration association which so far has no formalized institutional or organizational nature and which is therefore best understood as an intergovernmental discussion forum rather than a full-fledged international organization. However, the BRICS has every chance of becoming an influential institution of global governance playing by rules different from those imposed on the international system by the most powerful Western States.

It should be noted that the BRICS' dynamic and multidimensional nature constantly challenges IRT in terms of explaining this phenomenon and predicting its future development. For this reason, among many IRTs dealing with the study of international institutions, we selected only those that, on the one hand, are the most influential within their respective IRT paradigms and, on the other, represent the most interesting conceptual interpretations of the BRICS.

### **Power Transition Theory**

The power transition theory (PTT), first proposed by A.F.K. Organski (1958), is the most popular theoretical approach to the study of the BRICS phenomenon among the Western scholars. The PTT (being developed within the framework of the neorealist IRT paradigm) is based on the assumption that changes in power balance in world politics happen systematically. This theory believes that conflicts and wars are normally the results of the growing influence of States competing with the dominant powers. In this regard, all States are divided into two groups: those which support the status quo, and "revisionists." Powerful and influential States, such as the United States, enjoy the advantages of the established world order and fall into the status quo category, while States dissatisfied with their place and role in the international relations system are considered revisionists. According to the PTT, the latter favor radical changes in the existing international order. In this sense, Russia and China are the primary candidates for the revisionist powers, while Brazil, India and South Africa are perceived by the PTT as the states with 'moderate' revisionist ambitions (mostly of a regional character, although Brazil and India have some global aspirations such as their intention to become permanent members of the UN Security Council).

According to the PTT, present-day Russia is a typical revisionist state. Experts from the Heritage Foundation, a conservative American think tank, see in this regard several problems that Russia creates for the United States and its allies. In their opinion, the Putin regime is challenging democratic values, as manifested by a combination of citizens' political, civil and economic rights violations and a weak economy. The restoration of Russia's military, political and diplomatic powers creates a strategic challenge to the West and its allies. In particular, they

believe that the threat to the U.S.- friendly countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Poland, the Baltic States, Finland and Sweden, is constantly growing. The problem is amplified by Russia's cooperation with the "rogue States," such as Syria, Iran and North Korea (Carafano, 2015). Similar assessments are made with regard to the PRC's (People's Republic of China) foreign policies (Cheng, 2016).

While the revisionist powers are viewed as a source of the international system's destabilization and their activities are automatically associated with negative consequences, the dominant (status quo) States' behavior is considered positive because they perform protective functions within the above system. Paradoxically, from this point of view, the cases, such as the NATO military intervention in Kosovo (1999) which led to the final collapse of Yugoslavia, U.S. ballistic missile defense system deployment in Europe, NATO's eastward expansion, Western sponsorship of a series of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, bullying Iran, American military assistance to Taiwan, U.S. navy's regular demonstration of the free navigation principle in the South China Sea, etc., cannot be seen as revisionist acts and do not pose a threat to Russia, PRC or anyone (Carafano, 2015: 3).

The PTT proponents differ by their evaluation of revisionist behavior's sources and motivation. More moderate experts believe that sources of such behavior lie in Russia's and the PRC's failure to build democracy and market economy domestically, which prevents them from fully integrating into the world economy and global governance system (Granhölm et al., 2014: 10, 26–29]. A more radical point of view is that, due to Russia's and China's historical/civilizational peculiarities, they are fundamentally unable to integrate with the West (Carafano, 2015: 3).

Brazil's, India's and South Africa's 'moderate' revisionist policies are explained first and foremost by their ambitions to play a role of 'regional hegemonies' in South America, South Asia and Africa, respectively. However, in contrast with Brazil and South Africa which have no 'hot' conflicts with their neighbors and primarily use the soft power arsenal to achieve dominant positions in their 'spheres of influence', India faces much more serious security challenges including territorial disputes with China and Pakistan and—occasionally—military confrontation with the latter.

It should be noted that individual BRICS countries' policies are assessed differently. One group of the PTT supporters sees the BRICS as an instrument allowing some of its members to secure their great power status and counterbalance the West at the regional and global levels. However, the majority of the PTT followers sees the BRICS countries' international standing

differently: while Brazil, China and India are viewed as rising powers, Russia and South Africa are seen as declining powers due to their economic problems. To respond to challenges posed by the PRC and Russia different variants of containment policy are suggested by the PTT proponents.

However, not all PTT theorists see BRICS countries as revisionist powers. Some of them take the view that even Putin's Ukraine policy can be seen as a status quo strategy that aims to secure Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space and counterbalance NATO's eastward expansion (Charap & Shapiro, 2014; Kühn, 2015]. These analysts believe that the same (status quo) motives drive Beijing's and Moscow's behavior at the global level. For example, the PRC and Russia are quite skeptical about the United Nations (UN) reform preferring to keep intact its structure and powers. However, other BRICS participants (e.g., Brazil, India and South Africa), on the contrary, express their interest in the UN reform in the hope that their status will be elevated both in the UN Security Council and generally in the UN system.

The status quo version of the PTT believes that many problems with BRICS countries stem from the fact that they were not integrated on an equal footing into the international security system which has emerged in the post-Cold War era. The West crossed some "red lines" which were established by Russia in the post-Soviet space. For example, the August 2008 Russian-Georgian armed conflict was a clear manifestation of such Western policy. The Saakashvili regime launched an attack against South Ossetia, being confident that it would be backed by both Washington and Brussels. The Ukrainian crisis, which started in 2014 and continues to this date, is another example. When the Kiev authorities who came into power after the removal of the Yanukovich regime openly stated their intention to join the European Union (EU) and NATO, Moscow reintegrated Crimea into Russia and supported pro-Russian rebels in the Donbass (southeastern part of Ukraine).

In this group's view, Russia's policy is determined not only by its geopolitical but also by its geoeconomic interests. Particularly, there is an ongoing competition between two – Russian and EU's - integration projects in the post-Soviet space: Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and the EU-run Eastern Partnership program (Collins, 2015: 3; Sergunin, 2013). Proponents of this point of view believe that it is better to cooperate rather than confront Russia. The same approach is suggested with regard to other BRICS countries including, for example, China's "Belt and Road" or "New Silk Road" initiative.

Despite a number of advantages, the PTT also has many shortcomings. This theory was more applicable to the period of the Cold War, when two superpowers were interested in

maintaining the status quo because of the threat of mutual destruction in the event of nuclear war. The present-day international relations system, including its structure, is still in its formative phase. In this context, the PTT can explain little about the BRICS States' behavior.

Moreover, the PTT does not take into account the existence of a third type of State— the reformist ones which do not fully agree with the existing international relations system, but prefer not to radically change the “rules of the game.” Instead, they try to adapt these rules to dynamic changes in the world order to make them more fair and comfortable for all the members of the international community. Quite often, these States do not behave as revisionists, but rather they favor the status quo by demanding that the previously established “rules of the game” and international legal norms should be observed. For example, the BRICS countries firmly oppose any attempts to revise the UN Charter regarding the use of military force and the principles of inviolability of state sovereignty and noninterference in the internal affairs of sovereign States (as opposed to the Western doctrine of “humanitarian intervention”) (Konyshev, Kubyshev & Sergunin, 2015; Sergunin, 2010).

At the same time, the BRICS countries are unhappy with the current order of things, in which a small group of highly developed countries dominates and tries to impose its rules on the rest of the world. The BRICS countries would like to change the existing world order, but in an evolutionary rather than radical (revolutionary) way, which justifies considering them reformist rather than revisionist powers (Hansen, Sergunin, 2015). The BRICS countries are also striving to cultivate an image of themselves not as spoilers or revisionists, but as reformers of the existing unfair international relations system. For instance, they are trying to create alternative financial institutions that would help prevent a new global financial and economic crisis (Mikhailenko, 2016; The Moscow Times, 2014).

As recent BRICS documents show, this forum also assumes responsibility in other areas of world politics – the environment, the fight against the negative effects of climate change, international terrorism, transnational organized crime, cybercrime and the reform of leading international organizations, including the UN (BRICS, 2017; 2018; 2019;2020). In general, the BRICS countries demonstrate their willingness to build a more efficient model of world order, and they try to do this in a non- confrontational way (Mikhailenko, 2016).

To sum up, if the PTT supporters want this theory to better fit into the present-day realities and retain its explanatory power, they need to revise the typology of States they use and supplement it with a new (“reformist”) type of powers.

## **Soft Power Concept**

The neoliberal IR theorists believe that the BRICS phenomenon can be better explained by the soft power concept. They underline that in contrast with the Cold War era, when many countries preferred to rely on hard (military) power, nowadays soft power instruments are more effective. The neoliberals note that soft power strategy is attractive to the BRICS countries for a number of reasons. First, it can help them overcome their negative image in the international arena, the image that resulted from their systematic involvement in a series of international conflicts (Russia versus Georgia and Ukraine; China versus its neighbors in the South China Sea; India versus Pakistan and China; South Africa versus Angola and Namibia). Second, the soft power arsenal can also be helpful in diversifying BRICS countries' methods of geopolitical and geoeconomic expansion and making these methods more effective.

Some specifics in the BRICS countries' interpretation of the soft power concept should be noted. First and foremost, the BRICS States interpret soft power differently from its initial meaning advanced by Joseph Nye, who defined soft power as the power of attraction. In reality, however, BRICS (especially Russian and Chinese) soft power policies are often dominated by pragmatic interests rather than the aim to be attractive for other countries. For this reason, such soft power strategies do not always take into account international partners' preferences. In Nye's view, this is often unacceptable to BRICS countries' partners and may even provoke a hostile reaction to their soft power initiatives (Nye, 2013).

As some experts rightly note the BRICS' reading of the soft power concept is much broader than Nye's one. Nye (2004: 11) believed that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture, its political values and its foreign policies which should be attractive to foreign partners. The BRICS theorists, however, tend to include to the soft power problematique everything which cannot be attributed to the hard (military) security agenda. In other words, for the BRICS countries, the soft power concept is synonymous to the soft (non-military) security concept which includes not only diplomatic and socio-cultural components (according to Nye) but also other elements, such as, for example, economic and/or financial power [Gronskaya, Makarychev, 2010; Tsygankov, 2013; Sergunin, Karabeshkin, 2015; Tsygankov, 2012]. The latter was unacceptable for Nye who believed that economic and financial instruments can be tools of coercion and payment rather than attraction.

Furthermore, for the BRICS theorists, soft power is an umbrella concept which covers other closely related concepts – public diplomacy, peoples' diplomacy, the humanitarian dimension of politics and NGO-diplomacy. Among soft power instruments, economic and financial tools,

cultural cooperation, ethnic diasporas, and educational and religious institutions are preferable methods for the BRICS countries. The BRICS States established special bodies for soft power implementation: for example, China's Confucius Institutes, Russia's Rossotrudnichestvo (agency for cooperation with compatriots abroad), "Russian World", Gorchakov and Andrei Pervozvanny foundations are among others.

It should be also noted that BRICS interpretations of the soft power concept are rather instrumentalist. For them, the soft power potential is just one of many tools to protect their national interests, which should be used pragmatically and, if necessary, in combination with other methods, including the coercive ones.

In these countries, soft power policy is controlled and directed to a large extent by the government and this makes it less flexible and effective. In Nye's (2013) opinion, Russia and China made a mistake by underestimating the importance of civil society's institutes and initiatives, while, for instance, in the U.S. the main sources of soft power are universities, NGOs, cinema and pop culture rather than the government. According to Nye, the state should multiply the effect of the civil society's activities rather than limit them.

However, it would be wrong to depict BRICS soft power strategies as a complete failure. Along with some shortcomings, these strategies have certain achievements and competitive advantages. For example, the BRICS managed to successfully demonstrate the inclusive nature of its cooperative format. The BRICS countries are located on different continents and have different political systems, levels of economic development, histories and cultural traditions. However, the BRICS shows that different countries are able to overcome old conflicts, negative historical experiences, mutual misperceptions and successfully cooperate in a mutually beneficial way.

Moreover, in contrast with the West, over the last 20 years the BRICS has demonstrated its success in the field of socioeconomic development. In 1990–2015, the share of Western countries in the world gross domestic product (GDP) fell from 78.7% to 56.8%, while the share of emerging economies increased from 19.0% to 39.2% (UN database, 2018). Even Brazil's and Russia's economic hardships over the last five years did not reverse this trend.

Finally, India, China and Russia have long histories and unique cultures which have substantially enriched world culture and still remain very attractive for other nations.

Generally speaking, BRICS countries use soft power in their own way, trying to avoid copying the Western experience and going beyond Nye's "narrow" interpretation of the soft power concept. In practical terms, they stick to an instrumentalist and pragmatic approach to the



use of soft power which is oriented to the promotion and protection of national interests rather than taking into account international partners' preferences. It should be noted that these States' policy makers and expert/academic communities have not yet developed a clear terminology with regard to soft power and this negatively affects both theoretical understanding and effectiveness of this political instrument. At the same time, BRICS countries have a tremendous soft power potential which can strengthen their international positions if it is properly used. On a number of occasions, BRICS countries demonstrated successful use of the soft power arsenal: China's economic, financial and cultural expansion in South East Asia, Africa and Latin America; Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative; Russia's rather successful integrationist projects in the post-Soviet space (Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization), etc.

### **Peaceful Coexistence Theory**

Historically, the peaceful coexistence concept was and is one of the distinctive characteristics of Russia's, India's and China's foreign policies although Moscow and New Delhi do not use it in their official vocabularies since the end of the Cold War. It was developed – in various forms – by representatives of neoliberalism, globalism and neorealism.

In Russia, it emerged in the initial period of the Soviet state, during a time in which it had to operate in a hostile capitalist environment. Peaceful coexistence did not stop confrontation with world capitalism but, since the Soviet leadership led by Vladimir Lenin felt itself isolated, it preferred to transform its confrontation with the West from the military to nonmilitary spheres. In Lenin's interpretation, avoiding armed conflict did not mean peace with capitalism, which was seen as hostile by definition. On the contrary, he considered peaceful coexistence to be the transformation of war into other forms of rivalry, first and foremost economic competition that could demonstrate the advantages of the socialist development model (Lenin, 1970: 78).

This concept dominated the Soviet foreign policy thinking in the post-World War II period, including Mikhail Gorbachev's "perestroika," (restructuring). However, it turned out that with the end of the Cold War the concept was no longer interesting to the Russian political class partly because of its Marxist-Leninist connotations and also because in the 1990s Moscow aimed to integrate Russia to the world capitalist economic and political systems rather than coexist with them. The concept itself thus disappeared from Russian doctrinal documents.

China, in contrast with Russia, never abandoned the peaceful coexistence concept and elevated it to the status of a fundamental international relations principle after the 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo. According to Beijing, this concept includes postulates such as respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, noninterference in domestic affairs,

equality of States in international relations and the leading role of the UN in world politics because of its universal nature (Russian Newspaper, 1999). China suggested peaceful coexistence as an alternative concept to American “neo-interventionism.”

In India, the peaceful coexistence concept was transformed from its initial version (*Pancha Chila* or "Five Principles") into the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* concept (“the whole world as one family”) which rejected the very idea of hegemony (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2015: 115–124).

In formal terms, Brazil’s foreign policy doctrinal documents stopped mentioning the peaceful coexistence concept in the 1960s; however, the state’s real international policies were in line with this principle. This included the establishment of bilateral cooperative links with other countries regardless of their political and economic regimes, respect for national sovereignty, and the development of multilateral cooperation (Abdenur, 2015).

In South Africa, the peaceful coexistence principle in the form of the *Ubuntu* concept was formally acknowledged in the 2011 white book on foreign policy. This concept was defined as “respect for all States, nations and cultures,” while the understanding of national security was based on the acknowledgement of the priority of human security (Mandrup & Smith, 2015: 150–151).

The BRICS countries’ renewed interest in the peaceful coexistence concept can be explained by several objective factors. At certain points, these States started to express their discontent with the existing model of relations with the West which they considered to be unviable and unacceptable. For example, Russia faced the failure of several ideas and models, such as the “comprehensive security” concept (Mikhail Gorbachev), Russia as a “younger partner” of the West (Boris Yeltsin) and “strategic partnership” with the U.S. (two initial presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev’s administration). The West had no respect for BRICS countries’ regional and global interests; it heavily criticized them for “authoritarianism,” a democracy deficit and human rights violations. Such Western policies forced not only the BRICS countries but also other States – which did not want to accept the “golden billion’s” dictate – to realize that different/alternative social development models are preferable. For this reason, they believed, the peaceful coexistence concept could be helpful in building relations between States with different socioeconomic and political systems.

It should be noted that presently the peaceful coexistence concept has a different meaning as compared to the Cold War era because the antagonistic confrontation between the two sociopolitical systems – capitalism and socialism - has ended. The BRICS countries do not aim to defeat the world capitalist system as was the case with the socialist States in the past. They

just want integration into the world economy and global governance systems on an equal basis. In geopolitical terms, Russia has lost its superpower status and cannot compete with other poles of power as it could previously, while other BRICS countries try to avoid global confrontation with the U.S. altogether.

The updated interpretation of the peaceful coexistence concept by the BRICS countries can be summarized as follows:

- countries with different economic and sociopolitical systems can coexist peacefully;
- the dominance of one or several countries in world politics is unacceptable;
- preference should be given to the soft power tools, while military force should be used only as a last resort, on the exceptional level;
- Despite the numerous divergences with the West, the BRICS countries have a broad cooperative agenda with the U.S., EU, Japan, NATO and other Western-led institutions that includes weapons of mass destruction non-proliferation; arms control and disarmament; conflict prevention and resolution; fighting international terrorism and transnational crime; environment protection and climate change mitigation; civil protection; outer space and world ocean research; humanitarian and cultural cooperation, etc.

The peaceful coexistence concept has not yet entered the permanent political lexicon of the BRICS countries (with the exception of the PRC). This is partly due to a kind of “allergy” to Marxist-Leninist terminology. But in one form or another, this concept is present in their foreign policy arsenals (De Coning et al., 2015; Sergunin, 2016: 37–45).

However, as noted by a number of researchers, the peaceful coexistence concept cannot embrace the entire complexity and diversity of the BRICS and its international activities. It partly sheds light on the motivation and certain features of “the five” in the international arena. But it cannot give a full explanation as to why these countries have united into a group, and what long-term strategic goals they pursue. It also cannot explain where the limitations of the peaceful coexistence policy are, beyond which the BRICS countries are willing to resort to force, and what factors induce them to take such sometimes risky steps (De Coning, 2015; Sergunin, 2016: 45).

More generally, all of the theories and concepts discussed above suffer from one significant shortcoming: being based on the principles of rationalism, i.e., a perception of the BRICS countries as purely rational actors seeking to maximize their benefits and build their activities in a pragmatic way, they are unable to explain the emotional, unpredictable, illogical actions taken by these States which not only do not benefit them, but sometimes even harm their national interests.

## Status Theories

Being rooted in psychology status theories are also used by social sciences, including IRT. They are particularly useful for explaining those cases in which the BRICS countries' policies seem emotional, irrational and unpredictable. Such policies do not fit into the theories built on the principles of rationalism, including the PTT, peaceful coexistence and soft power concepts. Status theories address policy motives related to self-esteem, reputation, honor and dignity, fame, sympathy, and other emotional and psychological categories that introduce an element of unpredictability into the political behavior of leaders, social groups and States. The first works on the correlation between international conflicts and state status inconsistency/underachievement were published in the late 1960s–early 1970s (Midlarsky, 1969; Wallace, 1973).

The return of status theories occurred in the 2000s, when representatives of various theoretical paradigms started to pay attention to non-rational, emotional factors in world politics. Schools such as neorealism and neoliberalism mainly focused on problems of survival and economic viability, considering a state's status to be a derivative of its military and economic power. For the post-positivist schools, initially, status was also not an important analytical category. For example, social constructivists believed that identity and norms were the driving forces of politics rather than considerations of status or prestige (Onuf, 2013). However it was critical thinkers belonging to the post-positivist IR paradigm who started to pay serious attention to the psychological aspects of foreign policy behavior.

As far as the BRICS countries' international behavior is concerned, the status-related issues were first raised in connection with the discussions on “resurgent Russia” and its efforts to return a great power status (Kanet, 2010; Kühn, 2015; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Neumann, 2005 and 2007). This turn in Moscow's policies was related to President Vladimir Putin's decision to more decisively defend Russia's national interests. The Russian president perceived the collapse of the USSR as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” The status of Russia had lost certainty: while its nuclear potential and the permanent seat on the UN Security Council guaranteed it a place among the most influential countries, by other measures it had been reduced to the status of a peripheral state. In this regard, some western experts evaluated the state of Russian elites as “status panic” (Forsberg et al., 2014; Hansen & Sergunin, 2015: 94; Smith, 2014).

Interest in status theories has been fueled by discussions about the nature of the conflicts between Russia and Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). The constructivists and post-

structuralists see these conflicts as manifestations of Russia's fear of finally losing its great power status. Moreover, this motivation may be even more important than concerns about security or economic well-being (Sergunin, 2014). Some authors go even further, claiming that Russia's status-oriented foreign policy has deep historical roots, because for centuries Moscow has sought to prove its great power status in Europe (Neumann, 2005).

With China, which previously did not have the great power status, the situation is somewhat different. Its rapid economic growth in the post-Cold War era has led to the situation where the old model of its political and economic relations with the West no longer worked. At first, China sought to achieve the great power status by adapting to capitalist norms, but it was never accepted as an equal in the Western community. Then Beijing took a more competitive position, but not in a confrontational way. It managed to positively change its image in the eyes of the West. The new image is based on the premise that China is a state that does not seek hegemony, but expects a respectful attitude from its international partners which corresponds to its new status.

India and Brazil also strive for the great power status, relying on their large territories and populations, economic and military potentials, and international authority. Their international behavior is often status-oriented and aims at increasing respect from other States (Mikhailenko, 2016; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010: 70]. For instance, the former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's statement on hosting the 2016 Summer Olympic Games exemplifies such status-seeking course: according to him, the choice of Brazil as the host of the games elevated its status from second-class to first-class country (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010: 70). South Africa does not have the ambition to become a great power, but at the regional level it certainly seeks to play a leading role in the "black continent".

In terms of status-seeking strategies, States seeking to improve their international standing may try to pass into a higher-status group of States (mobility strategy), compete with the dominant group (competition strategy), or achieve preeminence in a different domain (creativity strategy) (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010: 71). The choice of one type of strategy over another depends on the openness of the status hierarchy as well as the values of the status-seeker and established powers.

For example, since the end of the Cold War, the BRICS States have embarked on liberal democratic reforms to enter the economic and political institutions of the West, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the Council of Europe and the G7. At the same time, the closed nature of organizations such as the OECD, EU or NATO prompted China and Russia to move to a strategy of competition (Larson, Shevchenko, 2010: 72–73). On

the path of creative strategy, Russia is trying to rely on the neoconservative ideas of collectivism, spirituality and orthodoxy as opposed to the individualism, materialism and liberal morality of the West (Laruelle, 2008; Sergunin, 2014). Creativity is also produced by charismatic leaders at the level of “grand” diplomacy. For example, due to these qualities, President Vladimir Putin has managed to achieve international recognition of his September 2015 plan to destroy Syrian chemical weapons and thus avoid the U.S. military intervention in this country. The “New Silk Road” concept of another charismatic leader, Xi Jinping, was perceived as a Eurasian economic integration project that can be mutually beneficial for all its participants.

Despite their attractiveness, status theories still leave unanswered a number of important questions. For example, the question about status indicators (that should help in measuring a state’s international rating) should be clarified. It is also important to clarify the question of when status becomes more important than material interests. In terms of content, the question of which instruments – peaceful or coercive - the state uses to change its status is of great importance. As for the internal aspects of the status- seeking strategies, it is necessary to examine the extent to which domestic political institutions can influence the growth or reduction of the feeling of status inconsistency/underachievement in the society. These questions status theories have yet to answer.

### **Theory of “Global Regionalism”**

The BRICS is unique because it does not represent a typical geographical region consisting of a set of States that are geographically close to each other and form a single historical, economic, political and socio-cultural community (or at least seek to create such a community). According to the theory of “new regionalism” {Lagutina, 2009; Lagutina & Vasilyeva, 2012; Acharya, 2014; Heininen, 2016; Hettne et al., 1999; van Langenhove, 2011), the BRICS belongs to the category of the so-called “global regions” which are based on functional, network-type, identity, multi-actor and multifactor principles rather than on geographic proximity. Such regions have a cross- cutting nature: they easily permeate various levels – local, regional and global – to create a completely different type of world politics (Avdokushin & Zharikov, 2013; Meena, 2015). In addition to the BRICS, such global regions include, for example, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Mercado Común del Sur, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Arctic.

Supporters of the global regionalism theory believe that during its existence, the BRICS has managed to form a common transnational agenda. Among the most important areas of the BRICS countries’ cooperation are the following:

- improvement of the global financial system;
- development of industrial and commercial relations;
- energy security;
- cooperation in the field of climate change and environmental protection;
- joint research projects;
- the fight against cyber terrorism, and
- coordination of these countries' activities in international organizations, including the UN and its specialized agencies.

In support of this global agenda, the BRICS created a number of its own financial institutions – the New Development Bank with a capital of \$100 billion and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (\$100 billion as well).

In 2013, China has launched the New Silk Road (or Belt and Road) initiative (Lagutina & Batur, 2016; Leksyutina, 2017}. At first, it was aimed at the development of a land transport corridor through the territory of Eurasia. It was then supplemented by sea routes from East Asia to Europe, both southern (through the Suez Canal) and northern (Northern Sea Route) ones. In the end, the project has acquired a truly global dimension, incorporating the Asia-Pacific region and South America, where one of the BRICS members is located (Brazil).

At the same time, critics of the global regionalism theory note that in the framework of the BRICS, a truly unified agenda has not yet emerged. With rare exceptions, most of the cooperative ties within the BRICS are bilateral, not multilateral. In addition, there are numerous differences between the members of this international group. Particularly, there are serious disagreements between India and China, including territorial disputes between them that regularly lead to direct military-political confrontation. Opponents of this theory believe that it is too early to speak of the BRICS as a whole community comparable with other integration entities. For this reason, the BRICS is not yet able to play a truly influential role either in world politics or the global economy.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, various IRTs offer their explanations of the BRICS phenomenon, including the sources of this forum, motives for the member-States' behavior and the role that this group plays in the present-day world politics and global economy. Speaking about the relative value or explanatory power of each of these theories, it seems that they often complement rather than

exclude each other. Together, on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach, they form the foundation for studying a complex politico- economic phenomenon, such as the BRICS.

The newest IR theories (post-positivist schools) tend to hold that, along with the pursuit of purely material and pragmatic interests (hedging financial and economic risks in the era of globalization, developing joint industrial and infrastructure projects, counterbalancing Western expansionism, solving various common problems ranging from environmental protection to fighting international terrorism and transnational crime), the BRICS countries are actively using this forum to strengthen their positions on the world stage and elevate their international statuses.

In their status-seeking policies, the BRICS member-States apply various methods - from the mobility and competition strategies to different types of creativity. These foreign policy strategies have had some effect, with the exception of Russia whose international reputation has suffered because of the Ukrainian crisis. In general, most of the BRICS countries have managed to create an image of themselves as constructive and peaceful States preferring cooperation to confrontation, respecting international rules and their international partners. Even for Russia, participation in BRICS has proved to be very useful from a reputational/status point of view. Since the BRICS countries did not support Western sanctions against Moscow, Russia managed not only to avoid complete international isolation, but also to actively influence international developments, both regionally and globally.

In general, the BRICS has managed to shape its image as an alternative model of world order based on principles and rules of interstate cooperation which exclude discriminatory and hierarchical types of relations. It is too early to say that a fundamentally new type of international relations or international institution has been created within the BRICS framework, but, undoubtedly, some positive experience has been accumulated by this association. It is safe to assume that in the foreseeable future the BRICS phenomenon will remain a subject of the closest attention from IR theorists.



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