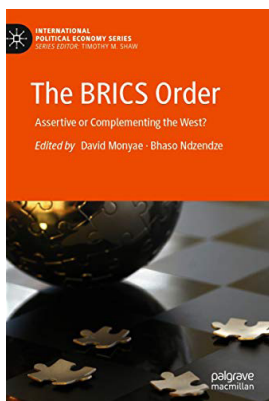


## Book review

# The BRICS Order: Assertive or Complementing the West?

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The BRICS Order: Assertive or Complementing the West?

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The collection of chapters in the book, *The BRICS Order: Assertive or Complementing the West?* Edited by David Monyae and Bhaso Ndzendze, represents growing literature from global South scholars interrogating whether the BRICS complement the Western agenda or present a different world order. This vital book poses this critical question in an international political economy environment where the BRICS have unequivocally expressed their interest in forming a new global order representing the interests of developing nations. The book also adds to the growing debate on the relevance of the BRICS in international development and the role played by emerging powers in influencing the global political economy.

The opening chapter by Monyae and Ndzendze explains the book's central theme, the necessary ingredients for the BRICS to advance their interests and ideas in the global political economy. As the authors explain, the main emphasis of the book is on "infrastructure—hard and soft—as the nerve centre of development. Ports, airports, road and rail networks, are central to economic activity, backed by soft infrastructure—health, education and capacity development" (Ndzendze and Monyae, 2021: 1). These are central points of development for the BRICS, particularly how power-wielding countries such as China and India strategically use economic power to extend their influence through financing development in Africa.

The authors turn to the strategic role played by the New Development Bank (NDB) as an alternative financial institution to the Breton Woods Institutions, namely, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The BRICS and NDB's strategic role can also be studied from the BRICS Summit Resolutions from 2009-2018, as appended by the authors, particularly the need for a reformed global financial architecture after the 2008 global financial crisis. Inevitably, this remains one of the most contested spaces, as noted in the absence of the NDB in financing COVID-19 reliefs outside of BRICS countries.

Much like many other books on the BRICS, the commonalities related to the geographic location, power, economic size and influence of the BRICS countries are cited as some of the foregrounding features that make the BRICS a formidable bloc in creating an alternative power structure from the. From the book, it appears that the central grounding is that an alternative power vacuum leaves space for the emergence of new power groups, and the BRICS is one example. However, authors such as Bond (2013) argue that the BRICS bloc is not adequately constituted to challenge the West,

but is merely a structure that complements existing Western institutions and ideas. Therefore, it is unsurprising that this book touches on the optimism of the BRICS, yet with little to show for the BRICS as a force in global political economy over the last decade.

The varying modes of governance and regimes within BRICS countries are often touted as discerning features and possible challenges for the BRICS vision. Ndzendze considers the '*Autochthonous Routes to Democracy*' in BRICS three main fully-fledged democracies, Brazil, India and South Africa. An important consideration for Ndzendze is the origin of the democratic rule in these countries, with a particular focus on their linkages to the West. While democracy is viewed as an idea that emerged in the West, the chapter by Ndzendze argues that Western nations often frustrated democratic hopes in countries such as India and Brazil by supporting military rule. This can be extended to South Africa, whereby Western nations initially supported the apartheid regime, despite the repressive and brutal policies enacted by the system. A fundamental observation by Ndzendze is that, within these three countries, democracy has rather been an internal development based on endogenous struggles rather than the imposition of the West. History teaches us that this observation is accurate for these countries, particularly how they endured decades and centuries of colonial rule.

While many studies of the individual BRICS countries' relations with Africa mainly focus on India and China, the chapter by De Conti, Hiratuka and Welle, looks at the BRICS financial and economic relations in Africa. The chapter is significant because it presents a picture of how Brazil expanded its focus from Angola, to the rest of the African continent. The basis of this expansion is argued in the chapter to be from the discovery of offshore oil and the growing need for investment in Africa's oil and gas industry. The chapter is also essential because it takes cognisance of the dynamics brought by changes in political leadership in BRICS member states. This is an important observation as leaders such as Bolsonaro adopted a pro-West position, rather than supporting the BRICS agenda.

Similar to the need to focus on the influence of a change in political leadership mentioned by De Conti et al., Gasela finds political leadership to be a key determinant in intra-BRICS foreign policy. In reviewing the main aim of India's participation in BRICS, Gasela argues that India plays an essential role in ameliorating between the Western order and China, thereby suggesting that India presents itself as an alternative to these modern hegemons. This assertion can be observed from the rise of India's influence in Africa and its ability to challenge the influence posed by China and the West. The chapters that consider the different political and economic interests of BRICS member states show that realism does dominate the international political economy.

While on China's growing influence in the international system, Shelton's chapter considers the importance of China's economic size and impact on the BRICS. The author argues that China's commitment is principal to the success of the BRICS project, and sees compelling reasons for China to pursue its national interests using the BRICS platform. While these assertions are fundamental, one must also consider the growing trade and relations under the China-Africa partnership that is pursued outside of the BRICS platform. In contrast to China, the chapter by Landsberg and van Heerden revisits the inclusion of South Africa in the BRICS. This is a significant consideration given that some authors see the inclusion of South Africa as a gateway to the African continent rather than inclusion based on influence and power. The authors find compelling reasons for the inclusion linked to South Africa's relations with other African countries and its influence on important platforms such as the Security Council.

Conflicts often shape the fortune of regional blocs. Ndzendze and Monyae revisit the challenges facing some of the BRICS member states, particularly the matter of the India-China rivalry and conflict in regions such as Kashmiri. The authors are of the view that the BRICS' longevity is tied to the political and economic connectedness of other BRICS member states to India and China and

within other members. What seems to be missing is the coexistence of the BRICS with the common vision of establishing a world order representative of the needs of emerging and developing nations, as pointed out by De Coning et al. (2015).

Using the example of Eastern Africa, Shilaho studies the increasing cooperation between the BRICS states and African countries, both from a unitary and bloc perspectives. Despite noting that the West continues to play a dominant role in the trading system in Africa, Shilaho observes that China's investment in Africa has grown exponentially over the years. The other chapter by Wekesa goes a step further by focusing on Africans' perception of the BRICS and the meaning of the BRICS power for the continent. This is undertaken from a methodological approach that utilises data from media content of leading business news. The central idea from the author is that how media reports on the BRICS is likely to boost or diminish their soft power. The weakness in this approach is the media narrative of the BRICS, is that media tends to influence perceptions based on the projected interests of readers and investors.

Knowledge-sharing is one of the five BRICS strategic pillars as it enhances cooperation and is of growing importance in the knowledge economy. Khomyakov argues for an integrative approach that not only focuses on the political and economic aspects of the BRICS relations, but one that extends to involving citizens. While the chapter mainly focuses on the role of Russian universities in cementing BRICS via knowledge sharing, it also calls for global South-oriented developmental models. To extend on Khomyakov's analysis, platforms such as the BRICS Academic Forum and the BRICS Civil Society Forum could play a leading role in knowledge-sharing.

With the emphasis on the role of higher education institutions in the BRICS gaining momentum, technology development has also emerged as a leading strategy for countries in the global South to catch up to advanced nations. The two chapters before the last, written by Lamrechts, Sinha and Marwala focus on the use of technology and innovation as drivers of the modern economy, with a particular focus for BRICS countries to transform their economies to meet the demands of the fourth industrial revolution. While these are important assertions and observations from the authors, many challenges that face the global South need to be addressed to effectively benefit from the digital economy.

The last chapter by Monyae and Matambo focuses on the most debated aspect of the BRICS, that is the NDB. With the dissatisfaction of the financing system led by the World Bank and the IMF, the NDB is promoted as an alternative financier for development in the global South. The entanglement of the NDB and global South within an international system dependent on Western norms and regulations creates complex dynamics for the BRICS' vision to change the face of the international political economy.

The chapters in this book present a fair assessment of the BRICS project and some of the pitfalls it faces, internally and externally. While the main question posed in the title is whether the BRICS is assertive or complementary, the conclusion from the different chapters points to differing opinions. Overall, the future of the BRICS hinges on important factors such as the continued cooperation between member states and the ability to ensure trade-offs that benefit the BRICS, rather than individual member states. The book makes a significant contribution to the continued debate and literature on the importance of the BRICS.

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