

The BRICS as an EU Security Challenge

The Case for Conservatism

Clingendael Report

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Cover photo: The heads of state of the BRICS countries at the BRICS summit in Ufa.

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Contents

Summary	5
Introduction: The Resistible Rise of the BRICS	6
The BRICS as a Security Challenge	6
Scope and Focus of this Report	8
1 The BRICS as a Security Challenge in Multilateral Forums	10
BRICS: From Economic to Political Clout	13
BRICS Security Cooperation: Real or Imagined?	18
Diversifying the Institutional Landscape	25
2 The EU's Neighbourhood and the BRICS: Security Implications	28
China, Russia and India in the EU's Strategic Backyard	29
The EU's Vulnerable Southern Flank	33
Exploiting the EU's Euro Crisis	34
Conclusion: The Case For Conservatism	36
Abbreviations	39

Summary

Apart from demanding a larger “voice” in global governance, most BRICS members are overall satisfied with the international system’s present functioning and therefore cherish a conservative, rather than revolutionary, vision of the global economy. The global veto power of the BRICS is bound to grow, but their proactive force in global politics will remain negligible. On practical security matters, the BRICS rarely act as a group and therefore have minimal collective leverage within multilateral fora and are particularly ineffective on military and security matters. The EU should not expect these intrinsic divisions to permanently block the development of the BRICS as a strategic actor. The EU’s declining economic and political power makes Europe’s vicinity susceptible to BRICS influence (and China in particular). The EU should adopt a cautious approach to the BRICS challenge, accommodating to its rise. China’s conservative streak is something the EU should cherish. Within the BRICS framework, China can manage and even put a lid on Russia’s rising pugnaciousness. This is clearly in the Western strategic interest and should be the basis for a more mature EU strategy towards the BRICS and its individual members.

Introduction: The Resistible Rise of the BRICS

Until a short time ago, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) were considered too much of a motley crew to be taken seriously. The only shared feature of these emerging powers seemed to be their criticism of Western institutions and their aspiration to recalibrate the balance of power within today's global governance frameworks. Although it remains undecided whether the BRICS will develop into a full-fledged, consolidated alliance in global politics, the trend towards intensified cooperation and institutionalization now suggests that this may well be possible. The BRICS have gone a long way from being the simple acronym conceived by a Goldman Sachs economist in 2001, to becoming the serious group of heads of state and government meeting at their 7th summit in the Russian city of Ufa in July 2015.¹

The BRICS as a Security Challenge

This Clingendael Report examines whether, and if so how, the BRICS are a security challenge to the European Union (EU). Given the comprehensive nature of the EU's agenda and the ever-widening definition of 'security', the report will not only cover traditional (politico-military) aspects of security, but also consider the economic, financial, institutional and normative challenges posed by the rise of the BRICS. Until a few years ago, the discourse around the BRICS was mainly economic; only recently have the BRICS nations manifested themselves as a (still potential and embryonic) 'security actor'. The first time that the BRICS arrived on the Western strategic radar was in March 2011, when these countries chose to abstain on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, which decided on the international response to Colonel Gaddafi's merciless actions in Libya. The BRICS sustained their presence as a 'strategic actor' during the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011. From the beginning, Russia and China (as permanent members of the UNSC) blocked attempts by Western and Arab states to punish the Assad regime for its brutal repression of the popular uprisings in Syria. Brazil and India, as well as South Africa, *de facto* supported Russia and China by opposing 'regime change'. The BRICS declared in a joint statement (in March 2013) that a 'Syrian-led political process leading to a transition can be achieved only through broad national

1 For an overview of the BRICS Ufa summit (July 2015), see <http://ufa2015.com/>.

dialogue that meets the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect for Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty'.²

Since this episode, the BRICS have met in many different configurations (heads of state and government, ministers, diplomats, parliamentarians and academics), aimed at coordinating policies and strengthening their collective presence in international forums. Most recently, the BRICS flexed their muscles during the crisis over Russia's annexation of the Crimea (in March 2014) and the on-going civil war in eastern Ukraine. Brazil, India, China and South Africa openly supported the Russian cause by abstaining from the UN General Assembly resolution (no. 68/262) criticizing the Crimea referendum.³

With the new drive to establish non-Western economic and financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), the BRICS have emerged as a global player to be reckoned with. This does not mean that the BRICS all share the same, and perhaps not even similar, strategic interests and visions. Brazil and South Africa are continental powerhouses, mainly interested in the BRICS project to increase South-South trade and to strengthen the role of the so-called 'Global South' in world politics; China considers the BRICS project the best way to spread its sovereigntist approach and to extend its own global power under the BRICS' multilateral guise; Russia clings to the BRICS as a means to mask and delay its own economic and strategic decline; whereas India seeks to acquire the status and influence commensurate with its growing economic weight. One could therefore argue that the BRICS (like the EU) is a forum used for advancing the national interests of its members.⁴ Yet one can also expect (akin to the EU) that working within the BRICS will gradually encourage members to streamline their national interests and visions, especially since outside expectations of joint policies and actions apply pressure on members to overcome their differences.

For the time being, the coherence of the BRICS will be hampered by deep fissures in economic interests and traditional strategic conflicts. Yet as the past five years have indicated, the West should not expect these intrinsic divisions to block permanently the development of the BRICS group as a strategic actor.

2 'BRICS Summit Draws Clear Red Lines on Syria, Iran', *The BRICS Post*, 3 April 2013.

3 Zhang Lihua, 'Explaining China's Position on the Crimea Referendum', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 1 April 2015.

4 For the EU case, see Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power From Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Scope and Focus of this Report

This Clingendael Report examines the security implications of the BRICS for the EU. Chapter 1 surveys the main security challenges facing the EU in its strategy towards the BRICS. It asks (among other things) whether the BRICS nations can use their growing economic power in support of their foreign policy goals in Europe's neighbourhood, and whether the very existence of the BRICS (as a group) will change the strategic playing field in Europe's proximity. Chapter 2 offers a brief analytical overview of the policies and interests of the BRICS in the EU's neighbourhood, ranging from the Middle East and North Africa (the so-called MENA region), to the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, including the Caucasus.

The report offers one clear and solid conclusion: the BRICS may not be a revolutionary force aimed against the West, but the EU's flagging economic and political power does make Europe and its vicinity susceptible to the BRICS group's influence (and the influence of China in particular). The rise of the BRICS is therefore part of the same story as the EU's unending and self-inflicted economic and political crisis (mainly because of its misguided euro ambitions), and its failure to develop effective security and defence policies. In short, the BRICS are gaining influence in Europe and beyond, mainly because the EU lacks the economic resources and political will to offer an attractive alternative.

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A clear illustration presented itself during summer 2015. When the EU found itself in a predicament over what to do with a recalcitrant and economically broke Greece, the BRICS heads of state and government held their 7th summit in Ufa (Russia), inaugurating a New Development Bank and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). The contrast could hardly be sharper: where the EU's institutions are under pressure, the BRICS are steadily developing their own institutions;⁵ where the EU's mistaken policies are eroding its image, the BRICS offer an ambitious 'Roadmap to 2025' as part of China's gargantuan New Silk Road initiative.⁶

5 Sebastian Dullien, 'Why the Euro Crisis Threatens the European Single Market', *ECFR Policy Memo*, October 2012.

6 'Riding the Silk Road: China Sees Outbound Investment Boom', *Global Markets – EY Knowledge*, March 2015.

For the time being, the security implications of this shifting balance of global power remain modest for the EU. Still, it should be of serious concern to policy-makers that the EU's toolbox is proving to be so maladjusted to the problems and challenges at hand. This implies that the EU will have to adopt a conservative approach to the BRICS challenge, one that is accommodating to its rise. In the meantime, the EU's influence in its direct vicinity will shrink as long as its own economic and political crises endure.

1 The BRICS as a Security Challenge in Multilateral Forums

It is generally assumed that the BRICS are so-called 'sovereignty hawks': they take far-reaching measures to harness globalization and limit the economic and political adjustment costs to ensure domestic stability.⁷ Since their interests focus on sovereignty and stability, they are reluctant to participate fully in the existing Western international order, and are generally only prepared to provide global public goods if it serves their domestic needs. The BRICS' penchant for classical *Realpolitik* is at loggerheads with the EU's approach to its strategic neighbourhood (that is, Eastern Europe and the MENA region). China's quest for raw materials in Africa and Russia's arms sales to the Middle East keep repressive regimes in power, and India's pursuit of energy deals with Iran has long undercut the Western policy of sanctions towards the mullahs; meanwhile, Brazil and South Africa are mainly regional players.

It is clear that the BRICS' strategic egotism affects the EU's strategic vicinity in several, sometimes contradictory ways. The obstructive role of Russia and China – the two 'global players' within the BRICS group – merits special concern. As Niall Ferguson observed, 'Russia, thanks to its own extensive energy reserves, is the only power that has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East'.⁸ China's role is more ambiguous, but Beijing's growing presence in the MENA region as well as the Western Balkans offers economic and political opportunities for these countries to 'look East' for alternative partners than the EU and United States (US).⁹ More and more, the BRICS do not just offer an *economic* alternative to the EU, but also act as so-called 'norm entrepreneurs' [see Box 1: BRICS and R2P].

7 Cynthia Roberts, 'Building the New Order BRIC by BRIC', *The European Financial Review*, February–March 2011, p. 5.

8 Quoted in Stephen J. Blank, 'Russian Strategy and Policy in the Middle East', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, p. 16. One could, however, argue that concerns over the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) offer Russia a stake in at least a modicum of stability in the MENA region (see below).

9 Ted C. Liu, 'China's Economic Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa', *FRIDE Policy Brief*, no. 173, January 2014.

Box 1 BRICS and R2P

The BRICS played a major role in the international debate on the relevance of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) with regard to the (civil) wars in Libya and Syria. It was even argued that ‘the future success or failure of R2P [...] will depend, to a large extent, on how it is received by the BRICS’.¹⁰

During the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in 2011, all BRICS countries happened to hold a seat in the UN Security Council. At their annual summit (in Sanya, China, in April 2011), the five BRICS nations committed themselves to using this unique opportunity to strengthen mutual security cooperation. As a result, the BRICS nations’ positions were coordinated within the UNSC, including the preparation of UNSC Resolution 1973, which installed a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized ‘all necessary measures’ to protect civilians in Libya against the Gaddafi regime. At first, the BRICS were reluctant, but were finally swayed by international pressure and reports of major atrocities. Brazil, Russia, India and China abstained, while South Africa voted in favour. By not blocking Resolution 1973, the BRICS tacitly backed military intervention in Libya, thus strengthening R2P as an international norm.

Initial BRICS support soon disappeared with the NATO-backed overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, which greatly damaged the confidence of the BRICS in R2P. India’s UN Ambassador even argued that ‘Libya has given R2P a bad name’, and that R2P was clearly used as a ‘smokescreen’ for regime change. As a result, the BRICS were keen to prevent Western-initiated military regime-change from happening again. In a joint communiqué, they rejected military intervention in Syria, calling for diplomatic solutions only. Russian and Chinese vetoes in the UNSC blocked all subsequent Western attempts to get a mandate to remove the Assad regime. The initial response of the BRICS to the Syrian crisis was unified. Yet as the crisis exacerbated, fissures within the BRICS bloc became visible. Russia and China continued to veto UNSC resolutions on Syria, whereas other BRICS members were increasingly willing to support a more robust international response to the crisis.

10 Andrew Garwood-Gowers, ‘The Responsibility to Protect and the Arab Spring: Libya as the Exception, Syria as the Norm?’, *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, p. 81.

The BRICS' involvement in the Libyan and Syrian crises went beyond mere criticism. The BRICS made a constructive contribution to the international debate on R2P. Their opposition to intervention in Syria is often unjustly viewed as proof that the BRICS are implacable 'sovereignty hawks', opposed to military intervention in principle. However, their positions are more nuanced. The BRICS have supported R2P on several occasions, for example in UNSC resolutions on Côte d'Ivoire, South Sudan and Yemen, and have officially endorsed the norm at the 2005 UN World Summit. The Brazilian government has argued that 'there may be situations in which the international community might contemplate military action to prevent humanitarian catastrophes'. The BRICS do not oppose all military intervention, but consider it an option of last resort.

The BRICS have acted as active global norm entrepreneurs. They argue for more robust criteria for authorization of future military interventions and lucid implementation mechanisms to prevent abuses of the norm. China and Brazil have contributed to the academic and policy debates by introducing modifications and alternatives to R2P. The Brazilian government presented the notion of 'Responsibility while Protecting', a concept that is supported by all BRICS countries. Recently, China introduced a similar concept: 'Responsible Protection'. These proposals should not immediately be rejected as attempts to undermine R2P, since they aim to reform the norm, rather than replace it. It also offers opportunities for the EU to intensify the dialogue with Brazil, China, India and South Africa on their involvement in (global) peacekeeping.

Most recently, China launched the concept of Responsible Protection (RP), building upon the earlier Brazilian notion of 'Responsibility while Protecting' (RwP). The Chinese proposal calls for the establishment of 'mechanisms of supervision, outcome evaluation and post factum accountability' for future (military) interventions.¹¹ If accepted, these alternative concepts will have major ramifications for NATO's prospects to intervene in Europe's volatile strategic vicinity.

Against this background, the EU faces three security-related questions in its strategy towards the BRICS. First, are the BRICS able and willing to use their growing economic power in support of their foreign policy goals in Europe's neighbourhood? Second, are the BRICS – individually, or as a (more or less) cohesive group – using their economic and political clout to influence the decision-making in, and the reform process of, relevant multilateral forums? And third, does the very existence of the BRICS (as a group) change the strategic playing field in Europe's vicinity, offering countries (economic, political and security) alternatives to what used to be the only attractive and credible 'game in town': the EU and NATO?

11 'Responsible Protection: Chinese Norm Entrepreneurship', *Post-Western World* (blog), 24 January 2014.

BRICS: From Economic to Political Clout

The only strategic document on EU foreign policy towards the BRICS was published by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) in February 2012. This so-called BRICS Report suggests that 'with the emergence of new economic and foreign policy powers, the EU will not see its leverage reduced but has an important role to play in promoting a common understanding on policy choices [...] through constructive interaction with the BRICS'.¹² In a related speech, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton, touched upon the key question by stating that 'what matters most is that the economic clout [of the BRICS] is translated into political clout, into self-confidence and ambition for the role that can be played'.¹³

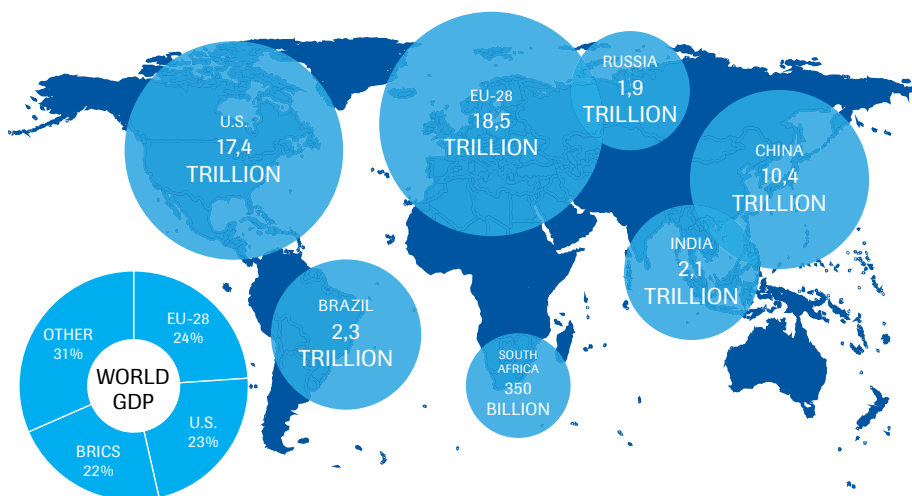
For the EU, the emerging economic statecraft of the BRICS is particularly important because of the EU's own dwindling economic and financial power. The global economic crisis that erupted in 2008 has seriously undermined the political confidence of (and in) the EU. For the Global South, the 2008 crisis has been a paradigm shift (akin to what 9/11 was to the West), since it seemed to confirm that the Western model (embracing neo-liberalism) was gradually giving way to the Chinese model (where a strong state manages a vibrant market). After 2008, the BRICS were well positioned to weather the global crisis, since they had preserved the capacity to manage their economic, financial and monetary policies. Meanwhile, the globalized West proved to have been weakened by relinquishing such controls. More recently, high-income (Western) countries have been resuming their role as drivers of international economic growth, whereas the BRICS (with India being the exception) are suffering from a structural slowdown.¹⁴ Still, four BRICS nations remain in the top ten of the world's largest economies (China, India, Russia and Brazil), and there is little doubt that all of the BRICS will expand their interests and ambitions as their economic power rises.

12 European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on the EU Foreign Policy towards the BRICS and Other Emerging Powers: Objectives and Strategies*, Brussels, 10 January 2012 (rapporteur: Jacek Saryusz-Wolski), p. 6.

13 Catherine Ashton, 'Speech on EU Foreign Policy towards the BRICS and Other Emerging Powers', European Parliament, Brussels, 1 February 2012.

14 'Rich Countries to Resume Growth Role as Developing Nations Stumble', *Financial Times*, 11 June 2015.

Figure 1 The BRICS' economic clout (GDP 2014, in USD)

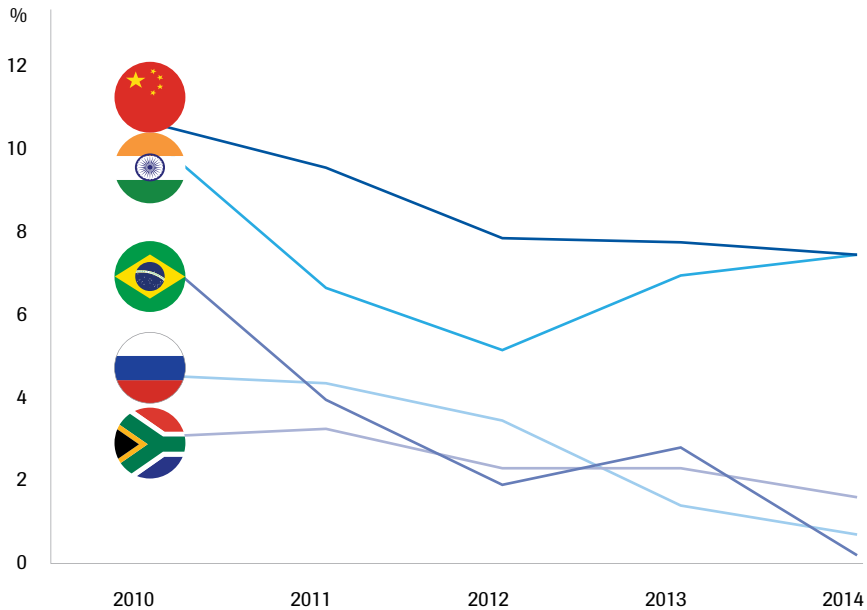


Source: World Bank, IMF, Wikimedia Commons

The EU's economic troubles go hand in hand with doubts about the wisdom and effectiveness of its foreign policy towards Eastern Europe and the MENA region. The EU's preferred foreign policy tools (trade and finance) have proven to be ineffectual in encouraging democratization on its southern and eastern borders. The Arab Spring of 2010 has now been rebranded the Arab Revolts; the EU's attempt to tie Ukraine to 'Europe' through the signing of an ambitious trade deal with Kiev has kindled an on-going civil war in eastern Ukraine (and given Russian the opportunity to grab the Crimea). In both regions, the EU has failed to reach its main foreign policy goals (democracy and the rule of law). Indeed, on the contrary, both regions have become more volatile and crippled by civil wars, the rise of extreme nationalism and religious extremism, as well as suffering general economic malaise. In the light of these developments, the EU is evaluating its strategy with a view to recouping its lost influence.¹⁵

15 See Kai-Olaf Lang and Barbara Lippert, 'EU Options on Russia and the Eastern Partners', *SWP Comments*, no. 32, May 2015; and Shadi Hamid and Daniel Byman, 'European Action in Middle East Conflicts', *Clingendael Policy Brief*, April 2015.

Figure 2 The BRICS's economic slowdown (GDP growth)



Source: World Bank

Although the BRICS are now experiencing an economic slowdown and significant political crises, it is nevertheless clear that their dynamic economies and state-led government styles challenge the EU's influence.¹⁶ The newly established AIIB and NDB indicate that the BRICS are consolidating their preferred style of consensual decision-making through increased institutionalization. This comes after more than five years of building up a network of coordination meetings of BRICS leaders, ministers and civil-society actors. The new banks will not just lend money to the Global South, they will do so without the strings of conditionality (such as human rights and sustainability, etc.) that the West usually attaches.

As Baroness Ashton rightly argued, it is not 'merely' a matter of economic power, but also an issue of growing self-confidence and ambition among the BRICS as an emerging bloc. The EU's strategy towards its neighbours (mostly organized within the European Neighbourhood Policy of 2004) is based on the assumption that the EU can draw these countries into its strategic orbit, even though the prospect of EU membership is denied.

¹⁶ Christiana Sciaudone, 'Brazil's Political Crisis Puts the Entire Economy on Hold', *BloombergBusiness*, 18 August 2015.

This was expected to apply to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as well as the EU's Southern Mediterranean partners.¹⁷ In both cases, the EU's self-confidence and ambitions have been dealt a series of severe blows, offering opportunities for the BRICS to extend their influence into the EU's traditional strategic backyard.

This obviously applies particularly to the global players within the BRICS: China; and Russia. China is actively increasing its engagement with the MENA region, mainly guided by its own energy needs. Over the past few years, the EU and the US have reduced their crude oil imports from the MENA region, offering China ample opportunity to turn itself into a major economic partner for the Middle East and North Africa. The region is also gradually becoming a growth market for Chinese products (mainly affordable consumer goods), which explains Beijing's support for the region's many autocratic governments. Given that MENA is a high-risk and volatile region, China remains reluctant to become a real strategic player, especially in the Middle East where the stakes (and risks) are highest. However, since China's economic interests in the MENA region will continue to rise (oil exports to China are expected to double by 2035), a more active political and strategic role seems almost inevitable. As Kerry Brown says, 'Beijing's growing economic stakes in the Gulf will necessarily go hand in hand with an increasing need to take securing of those stakes in its own hands'.¹⁸ The Arab Spring and the on-going civil wars in Syria and Libya offer the same challenges to China as they do to the West. And although China has retained a neutral stance on most issues (apart from siding with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in 2011), its support for Russia on the Syria crisis indicates that the BRICS as a strategic factor are on the rise.¹⁹

China's continued rather low-key approach and political profile in the MENA region stands in stark contrast to Russia's active and brash policies. As the strategic successor of the Soviet Union, Russia lacks China's geopolitical inhibitions, and it actively uses the BRICS group to expand its global role. Since its institutional inception (in 2006), Russia has been the principal driving force of the BRICS group. Moscow sees the BRICS as a 'new model of global interaction built outside the context of the old dividing lines of East and West'.²⁰ Given its own brittle economic position, Russia benefits greatly from China's economic strength within the BRICS; conversely, China uses the BRICS as a cover to defend its national interests within a hospitable multilateral setting.

17 The Eastern Partnership governs the EU's relationship with post-Soviet states Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine. The EU's Mediterranean partners comprise Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

18 Kerry Brown, 'Mixed Signals: China in the Middle East', *FRIDE Policy Brief*, no. 190, December 2014, p. 6.

19 'Assad Sends Letter to Emerging Powers Seeking Help to End Syrian War', *New York Times*, 27 March 2013.

20 Vyacheslav Nikonov, 'BRICS: Analysing the Security Dimension', *BRICS Information Centre*, June 2013.

This does not imply that Russian and Chinese interests always coincide (see Ferguson's remark above, at the beginning of chapter 1). Russia is most keen to gain status in the eyes of MENA leaders, mainly by energy and arms deals, as well as by obstructing Western strategic initiatives (Syria offers the best example), and conducting overall truly independent and assertive 'great power' policies in Eastern Europe and the MENA region. Probably because of its economic weakness and post-imperial insecurity, Russia is the most 'revolutionary' among the BRICS members, whereas the 'BRICS' preferences – singly and jointly – for global governance turn on reform and evolution, not revolution'.²¹ Russia's aggressiveness in Ukraine has been condoned by the other BRICS members, but only reluctantly (especially in the case of Brazil and South Africa). The recent joint Russian–Chinese navy exercise in the Mediterranean (around Syria, in May 2015), was flaunted by Moscow as a demonstration of their common understanding of the 'challenges and threats', as well as 'the need to restructure the current world order'.²² Still, Putin's military escapades in Ukraine make it less likely that Russia will engage forces anywhere in the MENA region. Since Russian trade ties with the MENA countries are modest and Russian arms' sales do not seem to give Moscow much political leverage, the overall strategic influence of Russia remains limited to Eastern Europe, as well as its ample power of obstruction imbued in its UN Security Council veto.

The security impact of the BRICS also extends to the Western Balkans

It should be pointed out that the security impact of the BRICS is not limited to Eastern Europe and the MENA region, but also extends to the Western Balkans, an area that is ostensibly on the road towards EU membership. Since European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has made it clear that these six Western Balkans countries will not join the EU before 2020, political leaders in the region have cast their hopes on attracting financial investment and trade with three emerging geopolitical players: Russia; China; as well as the Gulf states.

Russia uses its dominant position in the energy sector to extend its strategic influence in the region. The Western Balkans is an important transit route for Russian natural gas to Europe, which explains why Russia now has strategic partnerships with Serbia (which includes military and intelligence cooperation as well as coordinating positions in international forums), the *Republika Srpska* in Bosnia-Herzegovina (which briefly considered secession after Russia's annexation of the Crimea), Macedonia (which did

21 Leslie Elliott Armijo and Cynthia Roberts, 'The Emerging Powers and Global Governance: Why the BRICS Matter', in Robert Looney (ed.), *Handbook of Emerging Economies* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 520.

22 'Russia–China Clinch Tightens with Joint Navy Exercises in Mediterranean', *The Telegraph*, 11 May 2015.

not join the EU's sanctions against Russia) and Montenegro (whose economy is strongly dependent on Russian investors).²³

China is equally strengthening its position in the Western Balkans region by financing the construction of infrastructure projects (mainly power plants and roads) in Albania, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. A major China-South-East Europe Summit was held in Belgrade in December 2014, highlighting China's strategic interests in the region. This is part of China's strategy towards Central and Eastern Europe (the so-called '16+1' platform), which saw the light in September 2012. This new initiative offers Central and Eastern Europe access to a US\$ 10 billion special credit line from China, an investment cooperation fund, and a forum for cultural cooperation and the promotion of tourism and research.²⁴

Meanwhile, with regard to the Gulf states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seem especially keen to strengthen their ties with the Serbian defence industry.²⁵

The case of the Western Balkans bears out three conclusions. First, even in a region where the EU is supposed to have political leverage because of the existing prospect of accession, emerging powers like the BRICS are extending their economic and strategic presence and influence. Second, the growing influence of the BRICS in the Western Balkans has been facilitated by the EU's euro crisis, which has detracted from the EU's economic appeal and political pull. Third, Russia and China (as well as the Gulf states) are using their distinctively non-Western societal norms (based on support for authoritarian democracy) to cater to corrupt political elites in the region.²⁶

BRICS Security Cooperation: Real or Imagined?

Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, the rapporteur of the EU's BRICS Report, argued in 2012 that the 'BRICS group, as a cross-continental foreign policy actor, does exist [and] in most cases, the BRICS' positions are opposed to the policies and objectives of the EU'.²⁷ Similarly, Susan Rice, then the US Permanent Representative to the UN, lambasted the voting record of the three democratic BRICS members (Brazil, India and South Africa) as not

23 Matthias Bieri, 'The Western Balkans between Europe and Russia', *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 170, March 2015.

24 Jurica Simurina, 'China's Approach to the CEE-16', *ECRAN Short Term Policy Brief*, no. 85, January 2014.

25 Theodore Karasik, 'Gate to the Balkans: UEA and Serbia Strengthen Ties', *Al Arabiya News*, 18 December 2013.

26 Peter van Ham, 'Gridlock, Corruption and Crime in the Western Balkans: Why the EU Must Acknowledge Its Limits', *Clingendael Report*, October 2014.

27 'BRICS: The EU Should Speak With One Voice', *EPP Group Press Release*, 2 February 2012.

always being 'consistent with their own democratic institutions and stated values'.²⁸ These are strong and even somewhat hurried statements that need to be examined.

An argument can be made that the BRICS are less 'revolutionary' and even less obstructive than is often assumed, and that they (merely) want to be recognized as equal partners at the highest forums of international decision-making. Apart from demanding a larger 'voice' in global governance and all its main institutions, they seem satisfied with its present functioning and therefore cherish a conservative, rather than revolutionary, vision of the global economy.²⁹ Even during the height of the global economic crisis, the BRICS have offered no real, alternative proposals and no new ideas for how to reorganize existing international forums (apart from the recalibration of voting rights in their favour). The BRICS cherish the values of the Westphalian international order, which is why the EU (as a post-modern power) may consider this new coalition to be a challenge, and occasionally even a threat.³⁰ It should, however, be noted that the most vocal challenge to Western hegemony often does not come from the BRICS, but from 'revolutionary' states like Iran and Venezuela, whose collective geopolitical weight remains modest.

Still, Saryusz-Wolski is right, of course, that the BRICS are starting to constitute a new strategic alliance to gain influence in global governance institutions, mainly through so-called 'soft balancing' (against the West), and through increased South-South cooperation. Whether the BRICS are always opposed to the EU's values and interests is up for debate and remains to be seen. All BRICS nations benefit greatly from globalization and free trade, and most of them are marching upwards on the so-called 'global value chain'.³¹ As a result, they have a vested interest in maintaining major parts of the world's institutional infrastructure, and (as in the case of China) would benefit from the regeneration of global free-trade negotiations (such as the now defunct Doha Round) under the aegis of the World Trade Organization (WTO). It should be noted that the rise of the BRICS has encouraged free-trade initiatives such as the (US-led) Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the (EU-US) Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). These ambitious endeavours are part of a Western strategy anticipating a post-Western world, a world in which the BRICS will play a political role that is commensurate with their growing economic weight. For the moment, however, the key question remains whether (and if so, how?) the BRICS can use their economic and political clout to influence decision-making in, and the reform process of, the relevant multilateral forums.

28 Quoted in Armijo and Roberts, 'The Emerging Powers and Global Governance', p. 513.

29 Zaki Laidi, 'The BRICS Against the West', *CERI Strategy Papers*, no. 11, November 2011.

30 Robert Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 2000).

31 John West, 'China is Climbing the Global Value Chain', *Asian Century Institute*, 18 September 2014.

It is clear (and becoming *communis opinio*) that the Western model (of liberal democracy and market economy) is not necessarily universal, and that the world will be more pluralist than hitherto envisioned. Led by Russia, the BRICS have (since 2006) increased their institutional presence by organizing informal caucuses on the sidelines of meetings of international organizations, such as the opening of the UN General Assembly, the semi-annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and during the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conferences. The BRICS showed off their coherence by their congruent voting behaviour in the UN Security Council, where all five members were represented in 2011: the BRICS cast identical votes on 37 of the 38 resolutions that were voted upon in that year (until 1 September 2011).³² Other examples of the BRICS thinking and voting alike are the many climate change negotiations, as well as policies towards Iran and Syria.

The BRICS also regularly meet at their permanent representations of the UN in New York and Geneva in order to coordinate their positions and policies. On top of the already mentioned regular meetings of BRICS government officials, think tanks, mayors and academics, the 'grouping has been an important element in slowly adjusting each country's overall perspectives to a more multi-polar world'.³³ The flurry of BRICS meetings thereby not only aims to coordinate policies among its members, but also to strengthen the BRICS' political presence and global brand. Oliver Stuenkel argues that the BRICS nations air a 'sense of entitlement [...] which makes them articulate [their] visions with a sense of naturalness that often baffles Western observers. The underlying message is: We should have a key role in global affairs not because of what we do, but who we are'.³⁴

The discourse around the BRICS has been predominantly economic, and has only recently shifted into the domain of security. Starting off with the BRICS' call to have a greater voice on global economic and financial governance (in the IMF and World Bank), the on-going war in Syria proved their growing role in security matters. In October 2011, Russia and China (backed by abstentions from Brazil, India and South Africa) blocked a European-drafted UNSC resolution that called for an end to Syria's crackdown on protests. The BRICS acted in concert and as a strategic grouping to prevent a Western call for 'regime change' in Syria. For the West, this was an eye-opener, and the start of an enduring strategic headache. The January 2013 BRICS New Delhi Summit seemed to corroborate this development, since (for the first time) national security advisers of the five BRICS countries held a stand-alone meeting to discuss joint actions in vital

32 Susanne Gratius, 'The EU and its "Strategic Partnerships" with the BRICS', *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* online publication, May 2013, p. 2.

33 Oliver Stuenkel, 'Interview: Why the BRICS Will Remain an Important Force in World Affairs in 2015 and Beyond', *Post-Western World* (blog), 17 March 2015.

34 Stuenkel, 'Interview'.

security areas such as cyber-security, piracy, counter-terrorism and regional security (particularly in West Asia and North Africa), as well as the Syrian conflict.³⁵

The BRICS' claim to more global responsibility comes to the fore in the area of international peacekeeping operations. As permanent UNSC members, Russia and China obviously have major influence on the UN's peacekeeping agenda. However, within the BRICS context, they play a rather modest role, whereas Brazil, India and South Africa are actively engaged in the peacekeeping debate and tend to contribute personnel to UN peacekeeping operations. Russia's reticence can be explained by its understanding of UN peacekeeping operations as instruments of Western influence. As Jaïr van der Lijn and Xenia Avezov argue:

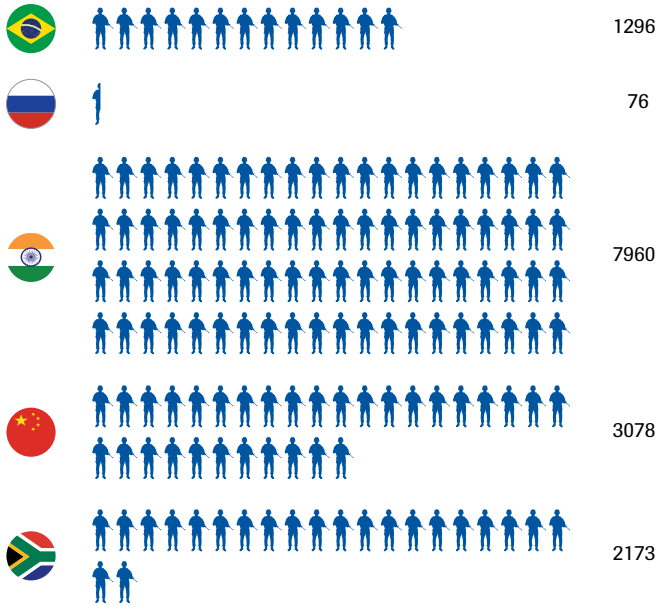
“ *China, which has increased its participation dramatically and continues to evolve when it comes to participation in robust operations, remains highly cautious. In Brazil, India and South Africa – all of which are major contributors – debates have begun about how to participate more strategically, in line with their national interests.*³⁶

This implies that all BRICS have their own, quite different stakes in (UN-led) peacekeeping operations, ranging from India's and Brazil's attempts to gain recognition of their growing global role to strengthen their claim for a UNSC seat, to South Africa's ambition to be acknowledged as the African continent's *primus inter pares*. Most notably, Brazil aims to make itself indispensable to the international community as a credible mediator between the West (or 'North') and the Global South. This is also reflected in the concrete contributions of the BRICS to UN peacekeeping operations: India regularly deploys attack helicopters; China tends to contribute engineering and medical units; Russia is the UN's sole supplier of heavy-lift cargo planes and helicopters; and South Africa is the key participant in UN and African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions in Africa.

35 'BRICS NSAs Thrash Out Security Agenda for Durban Summit', *Russia & India Report*, 14 January 2013.

36 Jaïr van der Lijn and Xenia Avezov, *The Future Peace Operations Landscape: Voices from Stakeholders around the Globe*, SIPRI Report, January 2015, p. 69.

Figure 3 The BRICS in UN Peacekeeping Missions
(military and police personnel contributed to UN peacekeeping missions)



Source: UN peacekeeping statistics (accessed 31 August 2015)

In the short term, Russian intractability is unlikely to change, whereas China is gradually moving (since 2003) towards greater involvement with global peacekeeping issues, making it the ‘largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping operations outside the West/Japan’.³⁷ China currently contributes more than 3,000 police experts and military troops to UN peacekeeping missions. In December 2014, a Chinese infantry battalion (of some 700 combat troops) joined the UN flag in South Sudan, which was a new experience.³⁸ China had earlier sent engineering and medical staff to Haiti, Rwanda and Mali, but the South Sudan mission was the first time that China demonstrated, in very practical terms, its commitment to ‘peaceful development’ as a benign ‘responsible

37 Frans Paul van der Putten, ‘The BRICS and the Future of Peacekeeping Operations’, in Jan Rood *et al.* (eds), *Peacekeeping Operations in a Changing World* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2014), p. 33. See also Sharon Wiharta, Neil Melvin and Xenia Avezov, *The New Geopolitics of Peace Operations: Mapping the Emerging Landscape*, SIPRI Report, September 2012.

38 Emma Campbell-Mohn, ‘China: The World’s New Peacekeeper?’, *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2015.

power'.³⁹ China's current contributions to the UN's Mali mission (MINUSMA) offer another learning opportunity, and are part of China's efforts to build local, regional and international strategic partnerships. This will inevitably give China more influence over future UN peacekeeping operations and the way in which they will be conducted.

All of the BRICS agree that without a UNSC mandate, no peacekeeping operations may take place. They also agree that regional organizations should play a central role in the deployment area, not only to legitimize the operations, but also to boost the influence of the Global South to the detriment of the West. Most interestingly, China's growing involvement in global affairs and its commensurate increased engagement with UN peacekeeping have somewhat softened its sovereigntist stance on non-intervention. This comes at a time when Western countries have curtailed their participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

Frans Paul van der Putten suggests that 'BRICS influence is unlikely to lead to major changes in the near future regarding the way in which peacekeeping operations are conducted'.⁴⁰ Most other academic analysts agree. Oliver Richmond and Ioannis Tellidis, for example, claim that '[n]o clear alternative model, ideology, or model of the state or peace is offered by the BRICS and/or other emerging powers'.⁴¹ Benjamin de Carvalho and Cedric de Coning argue that the:

“ [...] rising powers have a strong incentive to be cautious in their approach [to peacekeeping], because disruptions in the global order would harm their own economic growth [...] the reform of the international peace and security system is not a high priority for the rising powers, in the short to medium term, bar exceptional cases like Libya and Syria.⁴²

Yet, of course, *eppur si muove*. Today's Western neo-liberal approach to peacekeeping will inevitably change because of growing BRICS engagement. The BRICS' sovereigntist approach will result in more caution, strengthening the trend to empower local (and regional) ownership and contextualized solutions based on models that may differ depending on region. More concretely, four of the five BRICS countries have been actively engaged in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, but have not explored

39 'The Dragon Brings Peace? Why China Became a Major Contributor to United Nations Peacekeeping', *Stimson Spotlight*, 12 July 2013.

40 Van der Putten, 'The BRICS and the Future of Peacekeeping Operations', p. 37.

41 Oliver P. Richmond and Ioannis Tellidis, *The BRICS and International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding*, NOREF Report, January 2013, p. 8.

42 Benjamin de Carvalho and Cedric de Coning, *Rising Powers and the Future of Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding*, NOREF Report, November 2013, p. 1.

the possibility to do so under the BRICS banner.⁴³ The BRICS have also committed themselves to the training of peacekeepers, with Brazil (in 2005) launching its own Training Centre for Peacekeeping Operations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is also used to strengthen security ties among (some) BRICS members. In August 2014, an SCO anti-terror drill took place (called *Peace Mission 2014*), officially aimed at ‘countering terrorism, separatism and extremism, safeguarding regional peace and stability and improving the militaries’ coordinated ability to fight terrorism’.⁴⁴ These SCO exercises were at least partly aimed at preventing ‘external forces’ from ‘trying to provoke a new wave of colour revolutions’.⁴⁵ Clearly, the political aims of (at least some) BRICS nations are at odds with those of the EU. Moreover, especially China’s budding global engagement is likely to be self-serving, extending China’s global (political and military) presence and using participation in UN peacekeeping missions to gain experience for Chinese troops.

Since 2011, the BRICS have only occasionally flexed their strategic muscle, most notably by opposing restrictions on the participation of Russian President Putin at the 2014 G20 Summit in Australia. Although symbolic, it undermined the West’s attempts to isolate Russia. This was reinforced by the abstention of Brazil, China, India and South Africa from the UN General Assembly resolution criticizing the referendum on Crimea’s status in March 2014. Taken together, the BRICS’ line on Syria and Ukraine was interpreted as a possibly momentous precedent, since the BRICS’ predilection for blocking major Western security initiatives was considered a harbinger of things to come. This commitment will, however, be curbed by the fact that within the BRICS, only China and Russia (and, to a much lesser extent, India) are interested in military cooperation and global security. China and Russia aim for a global power status, and are willing to invest in their capabilities and reputation to reach that goal, if needs be at the West’s expense. As Russia’s President Putin argued in 2014, ‘We [that is, Russia and China] have agreed on closer coordination of our foreign policy actions, including those made within the framework of the UN’.⁴⁶ The other three BRICS countries only occasionally pay lip-service to this anti-Western agenda.⁴⁷

It remains difficult to predict whether this ostensible Sino–Russian strategic partnership will materialize. Still, some American observers fear that ‘[i]nto the 2020s, as China and Russia develop more naval, air transport and space power-projection capabilities, their

43 Vijay Sakhuja, *IPCS Forecasts: The Indian Ocean in 2015*, IPCS Special Report no. 167, January 2015, p. 6.

44 ‘800 Russian Troops Reach China For Joint Drills’, *The BRICS Post*, 14 August 2014.

45 ‘800 Russian Troops Reach China For Joint Drills’.

46 Quoted in Raymond Johnston, ‘Russia and China Reach “New Level” of Strategic Cooperation’, *The Prague Post*, 20 May 2014.

47 Heinrich Matthee, ‘Pivoting to Russia, China and Anti-US Paranoia: South Africa’s Foreign Policy Shifts’, *JISR.eu*, 2015.

military cooperation could extend to other regions' than their current involvement in Africa.⁴⁸ The Joint Sea 2014 military exercise by China and Russia in the East China Sea may well be an indication of things to come.

For the time being, the 'most likely scenario for the BRICS is its performance as a global veto-power, but not so much as a proactive force in international relations or an internal common interest alliance'.⁴⁹ Vyacheslav Nikonov, the Vice-Chairman of Russia's State Duma Committee on International Affairs, therefore concluded in 2013 that the BRICS are unlikely to become a 'security alliance', mainly because they 'are situated on different continents and their security threats often do not coincide'.⁵⁰ As Gordon G. Chang suggests, 'despite appearances, China and Russia are weak states. [...] Neither China nor Russia stands for anything more than its narrow self-interest'.⁵¹ This diversity also implies that the BRICS do not gain much collective leverage within multilateral forums, and are particularly ineffective in presenting a cohesive bloc on military and security matters.

Diversifying the Institutional Landscape

Although Western strategic concerns are real and realistic, the BRICS remain conservative in their approach towards the institutional infrastructure of global governance. All BRICS members realize that the escalation of security tensions will negatively affect the world economy, and hence their own growth prospects. Rather than directly undermining existing (and Western-dominated) international forums, the BRICS are developing a so-called 'parallel order' (including the AIIB, the NDB, as well as the SCO and other South-South cooperation endeavours). This offers all of the BRICS the opportunity to engage in 'competitive multilateralism', by choosing the preferred institution on a case-by-case basis (see below).

A case in point is the initiative to strengthen the UN's International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in order to compete with, and gradually even replace, the US government as the supervisor of the

Rather than directly undermining existing (and Western-dominated) international forums, the BRICS are developing a so-called 'parallel order'

48 James A. Lyons Jr and Richard D. Fisher Jr, 'Second Sino-Russian Alliance Shatters Illusions', *The Washington Times*, 4 December 2014.

49 Gratius, 'The EU and its "Strategic Partnerships" with the BRICS', p. 4.

50 Nikonov, 'BRICS'.

51 Gordon G. Chang, 'China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States', *World Affairs Journal*, March/April 2014.

Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).⁵² This call (which, most interestingly, is not supported by Brazil) would challenge the existing free and open approach to the internet and would increase opportunities for more state control.⁵³ The political and security implications of such a move may well be profound. Numerous so called 'colour revolutions' in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the early 2000s, as well as the ensuing Arab Spring, have highlighted the role of the internet and social media as a platform for popular protest and a means of communication and organization. Moscow has labelled these 'colour revolutions' a new form of warfare employed by the West.⁵⁴ Bolstering state control on the internet under the guise of 'digital sovereignty' would also strengthen the hand of autocratic regimes in Eastern Europe and the MENA region and would hence undermine the EU's overall strategic objectives.⁵⁵

The progress made in South-South cooperation also opens a new menu for choice for developing nations. Within the BRICS, China is clearly the biggest and most influential actor in the area of development cooperation. Africa is the biggest recipient (receiving 46 per cent of Chinese foreign aid), followed by Asia (33 per cent) and Latin America (13 per cent). Only a small part of China's foreign aid goes to Eastern European countries. With the launch of the AIIB, we will undoubtedly see an upsurge of China's development assistance, probably following the so-called 'Angola model', where projects are financed with Chinese credit, which is then repaid by future oil and raw materials' supplies. The surge of South-South cooperation implies that the EU's influence in the developing world will decline, and that Europe's approach of conditionality will lose out to China's so-called 'rogue aid'. China uses the AIIB and the NDB as multilateral forums to channel its aid, thereby reducing the often intense scrutiny of the West. As George Yin observes, 'Chinese support for the NDB reflects its desire to create an organization that it can control to launder its aid and reduce international scrutiny of its growing influence in the developing world'.⁵⁶ China's dominance in the AIIB and NDB implies that most aid will go to its allies, and that (inevitably) the appeal of credit with a minimum of conditionality will draw more countries into China's orbit.

52 ICANN is a non-profit organization responsible for coordinating and maintaining today's open internet governance.

53 Dana Polatin-Reuben and Joss Wright, 'An Internet with BRICS Characteristics: Data Sovereignty and the Balkanization of the Internet', 4th USENIX Workshop on Free and Open Communication on the Internet, San Diego, 18 August 2014.

54 Corey Flintoff, 'Are "Color Revolutions" a New Front in US-Russia Tensions?', *NPR*, 12 June 2014.

55 It should be noted that the US may be considered an even stauncher supporter of digital sovereignty. See Evgeny Morozov, 'Who's the True Enemy of Internet Freedom? China, Russia, or the US?', *The Guardian*, 4 January 2015.

56 George Yin, 'The BRICS Bank and China's Economic Statecraft', *The Diplomat*, 29 July 2014.

This will have only modest consequences for the EU's strategic vicinity. The Chinese principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries (including those receiving Chinese aid and investment), will solidify established regimes, whether (more or less) democratic or not. Yet given the EU's own dwindling economic power, the growing role of China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) in the MENA region and the Western Balkans owes more to a strategic *horror vacui* resulting from the West's political impotence and/or strategic neglect than it is the result of Beijing's careful planning. Observers who assume the latter often refer to Deng Xiaoping's strategic maxim of *tao gung yang hui*, which is said to mean 'hide one's capabilities and bide one's time'.⁵⁷ Although this may well (occasionally) apply to China, it has little to do with the rising role of the BRICS as a group, and stands in stark contrast to Russia's often brazen attempts to raise its profile as a global actor and regional power broker.

One may conclude that the three strategic challenges facing the EU from the rise of the BRICS (as identified above) remain pertinent, but should not be exaggerated. The BRICS clearly use their economic power and rising status to reach foreign policy goals, which include decision-making in international forums. They also develop alternatives to Western initiatives and institutions. Yet political cohesion within the BRICS is brittle, and there are many opportunities for the EU to develop constructive security relationships with the BRICS as a group, as well as with individual players.⁵⁸ For example, the EU's concern about the rise of radical Islam and Jihadism is shared by Russia as well as China. The new front line against Islamic militancy is likely to be at Russia's borders in Central Asia, as well as in China's Xinjiang region.⁵⁹ Although their preferred policies to address this shared strategic challenge may differ, the obvious necessity to work together requires open channels of communication, as well as chances to avoid the unwelcome rupture dividing 'the West versus the rest'. For the EU, the key (and still unanswered) question is how future engagement with the BRICS should be envisaged, and whether Brussels should develop its strategic partnerships with the BRICS as a group, or with (most) of its members individually.

57 Quoted in Roberts, 'Building the New Order BRIC by BRIC', p. 6.

58 Zhao Kejin, 'The Limits of Cooperation among BRICS Countries', *Carnegie Endowment*, 1 December 2014.

59 Ahmed Rashid, 'Jihad's New Frontier', *New York Times*, 12 June 2015; and Mathieu Duchâtel and Alice Ekman, 'Countering Terrorism: An Area For EU-China Cooperation?', *EU ISS Brief*, no. 14, May 2015.

2 The EU's Neighbourhood and the BRICS: Security Implications

The EU's strategic neighbourhood stretches from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus, and the Western Balkans through the MENA region. Towards all of the countries in its vicinity, the EU adopts its customary approach of conditionality, hoping (and expecting) that the lure of trade and/or accession will strengthen the rule of law and human rights in the countries involved. The effectiveness of this strategy has declined in recent years, since the political elites in the EU's neighbourhood are no longer convinced that joining the EU is possible in the near future, or indeed that EU membership remains the attractive prospect that it once was. This has opened the way for a more assertive presence by third players, which include several countries belonging to the BRICS group, but also Gulf states such as the UAE and Qatar.

This chapter examines the security implications of the BRICS challenge to the EU's comfortable position as the 'only game in town', both economically and politically. Is the BRICS' alignment mainly a 'power-multiplier' for the national interests of individual BRICS members, or does it offer a real alternative to the liberal Western order for countries that used to be squarely in the EU's strategic orbit? This chapter focuses on the policies of the three BRICS members with a global strategic vision: China; Russia; and (to a lesser extent) India. (Brazil and South Africa are important players in their own region, with limited – and at times no – influence in the areas surrounding the EU.) The chapter concludes with some reflections on the need for the EU to develop a more pronounced and sophisticated strategy to balance, and at times even counter, the BRICS' influence in the EU's backyard. Such a strategic overhaul is long overdue and – luckily – gradually gaining some support and modest momentum. We have to acknowledge that the rise of the BRICS has become a key argument for a more cohesive and integrated EU, but that the EU has no ideas and no policies to go beyond its existing strategic partnerships with all five BRICS members.⁶⁰

As Pascal Bruckner recently argued: 'What [...] should we say about the great imperial groups constituted by Russia and China, which are neither friends nor enemies [...]? Their size forbids us to mount a frontal attack on them; their police practices forbid

60 Guy Verhofstadt, *Een New Age of Empires* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2009).

us to treat them indulgently. They are simultaneously partners and threats'.⁶¹ It is this ambiguity that seems to paralyze the EU, making the rifts and fissures within the EU on how to deal with the BRICS group larger and more profound than the differences between the individual BRICS states.

China, Russia and India in the EU's Strategic Backyard

Richard Youngs has argued that the EU's approach towards the MENA region is based upon 'voluntary inclusion rather than imposed coercion, of shared power and partnership rather than subjugation and hard-power tutelage'.⁶² This approach draws from the EU's experience in Central Europe in the 1990s, and is now repeated in a very different regional context. The EU offers three incentives to the countries in its direct vicinity: money; markets; and mobility (the well-known 'three Ms'). Another 'M' can be added for the Western Balkans, where full EU membership remains a remote prospect, but is at least on the cards. The draw of the EU's 'empire by invitation' has diminished because of the economic and financial crisis that still bogs down most of Europe and now is even escalating in a possible 'Grexit' (Greece leaving the eurozone, and possibly the EU) and a 'Brexit' (the UK is set to have a so-called 'in/out' referendum by as early as 2016).⁶³ The important point to make and emphasize is that the EU's *relative* weakness (*vis-à-vis* the BRICS and other emerging economies), combined with the EU's inward-looking disposition, offers third players new opportunities to strengthen ties with traditional European allies.

China's strategy towards the MENA region is guided mostly by its huge and growing energy needs. In 2013, China became the Persian Gulf's main oil client, surpassing the US.⁶⁴ Until now, China has not been politically engaged in the MENA region, and it has kept a low profile in its relations with the Arab League states and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This neutral, hands-off policy is, however, bound to change for two reasons. First, oil exports from the Middle East to China could double by 2035 (according to projections from the International Energy Agency). Second, the development of China's New Silk Road initiative will develop trade routes through the MENA region, which is bound to result in a more Sino-centric world. Although China's interests in the MENA region remain concentrated on the energy sector, China's financial engagement (mainly through investment in urban and transport infrastructure) has boomed over the

61 Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 225.

62 Richard Youngs, 'The EU's Geopolitical Crossroads in the Middle East', *FRIDE Policy Brief*, no. 197, March 2015, p. 3.

63 Jan Zielonka, *Is the EU Doomed* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

64 Kerry Brown, 'Mixed Signals: China in the Middle East', *FRIDE Policy Brief*, no. 190, December 2014, p. 1.

past decade. This has made China a valued and dependable partner for almost all of the countries in the region. Beijing is ‘looking for the middle in the Middle East’,⁶⁵ which means that it takes a neutral, pragmatic and generally non-interventionist position on all of the big issues of the region, including the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, Syria and Iran. Countries in the MENA region understand that they will play a major role in China’s New Silk Road strategy, which will build a modern grid of oil pipelines and roads from Asia to the Middle East and beyond. As Abbas Varij Kazemi and Xiangming Chen argue:

“ [T]he ancient Silk Road serves as a modern-day political lens for how the Middle East and China see each other’s development. Given their shared ancient civilizations, strong traditional values, collectivist cultures, patriarchal social systems and centralized political systems, do some Middle Eastern countries view China’s model and road of development as more appealing?⁶⁶

The answer seems an unqualified ‘yes’.

The problem for China is that with increased economic and financial engagement comes greater political responsibility. Although Beijing is reluctant to take sides in the many conflicts in the Middle East, recent (civil) wars in Libya and Syria have shown that China, too, has to take more overt political positions and use the available economic levers to further its political and security interests. Instability in the MENA region undermines China’s quest for energy security, and the rising threat of Islamic extremism and Jihadism also affects China’s domestic stability (mainly in its Muslim Xinjiang region). The fact that economic power engenders political power and responsibility is logical and hardly new – it explains US hegemony after the Second World War. It also explains the EU’s crumbling sway over developments in the Southern Mediterranean. For now, the EU is keen to involve China in finding multilateral solutions to MENA crises. Although this seems to be the best (and probably also only) way forward, it remains unclear whether the security interests of China and the EU are sufficiently congruent to foster a true strategic partnership.

Russia’s interests in the MENA region are diverse, ranging from energy security, capping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – mainly in Iran – and conventional arms exports and halting the rise of radical (mainly Sunni) Islam.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Russia has been keen to maintain its (more or less) good ties with a wide variety of MENA regimes, ranging from Assad in Syria and the mullahs in Iran,

65 Lintao Yu, ‘Looking for the Middle in the Middle East’, *Beijing Review*, March 2012.

66 Abbas Varij Kazemi and Xiangming Chen, ‘China and the Middle East: More Than Oil’, *The World Financial Review*, 4 June 2015.

67 Mark N. Katz, ‘Conflicting Aims, Limited Means: Russia in the Middle East’, *FRIDE Policy Brief*, no. 201, May 2015.

to traditional Western allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, as well as Egypt, Morocco and even the Kurdish Regional Government. Like China, Russia feels vindicated in its belief that the 2011 Arab Spring would result in instability, rather than sustainable democratic reform. Moscow considered Western support for the Arab Spring movements as outside interference that was aimed at toppling traditional Russian allies, replacing them with democratic and (hence potentially) Western-oriented regimes. Russia also feared (and still fears) the rise of radical Islam in the MENA region, which will negatively impact upon stability in the North Caucasus. Russia's interests and politico-security agenda in the MENA region are therefore conservative, opposing democratization and supporting authoritarian regimes (as long as they are not Sunni, like Qatar and Saudi Arabia), but unlike China, Russia lacks the economic and financial levers to back up its interests.

Russia tries to overcome its economic weakness by exploiting the traditional tactic of military support and arms exports to gain a legitimate entrance, influence and status. MENA states have ample access to a booming global arms market, which include Western defence industries. Still, Russian military presence in the Mediterranean is growing, and now includes naval bases in Syria and Cyprus [see Box 2: The BRICS' Impact on Greece and Cyprus].

Box 2 The BRICS' Impact on Greece and Cyprus

The banking crises in Cyprus and Greece show that the BRICS' growing economic and financial power can put Western institutions under considerable pressure. While negotiating a bailout package with the European Union, the Cypriot government announced that loans from Moscow or Beijing were also being considered. Cypriot President Demetris Christofias claimed that the Russians were 'good friends [who] take care of Cyprus'. He recalled Russia's €2.5 billion loan to Cyprus (in 2011), ostensibly given 'without anything in exchange'. The Cypriot government also raised the possibility of turning to China. In an effort to strengthen relations with Beijing, Cypriot Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism Neoklis Sylikiotis and Chairman of the Cyprus Popular Bank Michalis Sarris paid a joint visit to Beijing to discuss the possibility of a Chinese loan.

In 2015, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras opted for the same approach. During the negotiations with Brussels, his Syriza government stated that 'if there is no deal, and if we see that Germany remains rigid and wants to blow Europe apart, then we will have to go to Plan B'. Seeking to strengthen relationships with Russia, Tsipras paid three visits to Moscow, where he discussed a major pipeline project in Greece (possibly in exchange for a loan from Russia). The Greek prime minister stated that Greece could serve as 'a link and bridge between Russia and Europe', and distanced himself from European sanctions against Russia by calling them 'a road to nowhere'.

In exchange, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia would 'positively examine' a Greek request for loans. To strengthen relations with Beijing, Greek Deputy Prime Minister Yannis Dragasakis, together with Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias, paid a five-day visit to Beijing in March 2015 to look for financial support from China. In return for reviving the privatization of the Greek port of Piraeus, China invested some €100 million in Greek treasury bills.

Both Russia and China have geopolitical interests in Cyprus and Greece. For Russia, Greece and Cyprus play a key role in Moscow's energy strategy, and also offer an alternative to the Russian naval facility in Tartus (Syria), which is now compromised by the on-going Syrian war. In addition, Cyprus serves as a safe haven for the dirty money of Russian oligarchs. Greece and Cyprus also play an important role in China's New Silk Road initiative. China is seeking to invest in Greek and Cypriot infrastructure (railroads and ports) and has already invested considerably in the Greek port of Piraeus.

Still, a bailout by China or Russia has never been a serious option. Russia simply lacks the deep financial pockets to offer either country a comprehensive bailout package. Moscow may also balk at further exacerbating its already poor relationship with the West. Moreover, Greece and Cyprus are not the big geopolitical prizes that they are sometimes made out to be. For Cyprus and Greece, it has been opportune to hint at a 'Plan B' (namely, Russia and China), while pressing Western creditors to grant them loans on more favourable terms. Upholding this story was also convenient to Russia and China, since it further undermined the power of Western-dominated global financial institutions and demonstrated intra-EU divisions. This has proved of special significance for Moscow, since it offered some relief from the EU's political pressure on Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

Interestingly, Cyprus – which is, of course, an EU member state – has sought Russian (military) support in its quarrels with (NATO member) Turkey over gas finds in the eastern Mediterranean. This is part of Russia's scheme to restore its status as a great power, capable of preventing a Western-dominated geopolitical order, and if needs be by military means. This Clingendael Report has already quoted Niall Ferguson, who observed that because of Russia's own energy reserves, Moscow has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East. In reality, however, Russia's at times radical rhetoric does not match its rather conservative approach towards the MENA region. Moscow may aim to annoy and thwart the West where it can, but overall has few economic, political and military tools at its disposal to wreak havoc. Since China's strategy is equally guided by conservatism, the EU is faced with considerable pressure to maintain the status quo in a region still bogged down by autocracy.

The role and influence of India, Brazil and South Africa in the MENA region is modest. Brazil is strengthening its economic presence in Africa and is becoming an aid donor,

promoting democracy and human rights (much like the EU).⁶⁸ South Africa's emphasis on South–South cooperation includes the MENA region, but does not offer it a special position. India's strategy towards the MENA region is mainly motivated by economic interests and ensuring the safety of the large Indian diaspora, mainly in the Gulf region. The Middle East and the Gulf states have become India's main trading partners over the past decade, which explains why Delhi was reluctant to support the popular uprisings during the Arab Spring. India has also remained on the sidelines during the UNSC votes on Syria and Libya, where it abstained (in both cases, along with Brazil).⁶⁹

The EU's Vulnerable Southern Flank

Similar patterns of policy behaviour by the BRICS members are discernible in other regions adjacent to the EU, such as the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.⁷⁰ Ever since China obtained (in 2009) a 35-year concession period from Athens to operate two shipping terminals in the Greek port of Piraeus, the EU has woken up to China's assertive and highly successful entry into the Western Balkans.⁷¹ This does not, however, make China a key player in the region yet. But China's attraction is on the rise, for the same reasons that the 'Beijing Model' has appeal in Africa and other developing regions: China's immense market; its lack of political conditionality; and its willingness to invest in energy and infrastructure projects. China is increasing its economic and trade ties with Serbia, as well as with Macedonia and Montenegro. As Loïc Poulain argues: 'Because money and influence are closely intertwined, Beijing's sizeable investments in South-Eastern Europe are as much about financial returns as they are about leverage.'⁷² It is little surprise, therefore, that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has stepped up military cooperation in the region, and has deepened its ties with all of the countries of the Western Balkans, apart from Kosovo (which China does not recognize). Politically, this means that Serbia is usually not willing to join EU declarations condemning China's human rights record; in return, China supports Serbia in its stand over Kosovo. The EU-brokered deal between Serbia and Kosovo of August 2015 is unlikely to alter this dynamic.⁷³

68 Oliver Stuenkel, 'Brazil in Africa: Bridging the Atlantic?', *KAS International Report*, 15 February 2013.

69 Bülent Aras, Elif Gizem Demirag and Mona Sachter, 'India's Dilemma in the Arab Spring', *POMEAS*, no. 4, January 2015.

70 The following sections are based on my paper 'Gridlock, Corruption and Crime in the Western Balkans', *Clingendael Report*, October 2014.

71 Frans-Paul van der Putten, *Chinese Investment in the Port of Piraeus, Greece: The Relevance For the EU and the Netherlands*, Clingendael Report, February 2014.

72 Loïc Poulain, 'China's New Balkan Strategy', *CSIS Central Europe Watch*, vol. 1, no. 2, August 2011, p. 6.

73 Henrik von Homeyer, 'Don't Leave Serbia to Russia and China', *EUObserver*, 27 March 2015.

Along similar lines, Russia's ties with Serbia go beyond a shared (Russian Orthodox) religion, and now centre on the region's key role as a transit route for the South Stream pipeline, connecting Russia's eastern gas fields to Central and Western Europe.⁷⁴ Since South Stream will circumvent Ukraine and link Russia closer to several key (Balkan) states (most notably Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Greece, Slovenia, Austria and Croatia), the project carries major geostrategic significance. Serbia is keeping its options open *vis-à-vis* Russia, including by becoming a permanent observer in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and by signing (in November 2013) a bilateral agreement on military cooperation with Moscow. Russia is also raising its profile as a regional trading partner, particularly in Serbia and the *Republika Srpska* (in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Although Russia's ambitions in the region remain unclear, recent experiences in Ukraine indicate that the 'Western Balkans are treated by Moscow as a proxy playground in a wider geopolitical competition with the EU and the US'.⁷⁵

Interestingly – and, arguably, worryingly – this geostrategic playground now also includes two EU member states that have proven economically vulnerable and politically susceptible to Russian and Chinese influence. In June 2015, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras met with BRICS Bank (now the NDB) representatives to negotiate a multi-billion US dollar loan. Under pressure from the EU to agree with another package of austerity measures, Greece felt obliged to look for alternatives, including China. Greece has already signed a deal with Russia to create a joint enterprise for the construction of the so-called Turkish Stream pipeline, which will run across Greek territory. A possible Greek exit from the eurozone, the so-called 'Grexit', will also have major geostrategic implications. James Stavridis goes as far as arguing that '[i]f Moscow were to assist Athens economically, even marginally, this would further distance Greece from Western Europe. Another likely friend and partner would be Serbia, which has its own troubles with various EU Balkan members. Ultimately, it is not impossible to contemplate Greece departing the European Union or even NATO'.⁷⁶ A similar scenario lies ready for Cyprus.

Exploiting the EU's Euro Crisis

Russia and China (as well as the Gulf states) are exploiting the ongoing EU crisis for their own strategic purposes. This is hardly surprising, and we have to acknowledge that the EU did exactly the same after the end of the Cold War, when it took advantage

74 Enza Roberta Petrillo, 'Russian Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: Which Perspective?', *ISPI Analysis*, no. 169, April 2013.

75 Adam Balcer and Veton Surroi, 'In Search of a New Paradigm: The Western Balkans and the EU Integration', *Demos Europa/Centre For European Strategy*, 2013, p. 36.

76 James Stavridis, 'What Are the Geostrategic Implications of a Grexit?', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 2015. See also Tijn Sadée, 'Grexit is Voor Chinezen en Russen een Ideaal Script', *NRC Handelsblad*, 3 July 2015.

of Russia's economic and political weakness to appropriate the remnants of a collapsed Soviet Empire. It is against this historical backdrop that the contemporary geostrategic tussle over Eastern Europe (and the Caucasus) should be examined. The EU's European Commission is now reviewing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a process that should be completed by autumn 2015. Most likely, the EU will aim for differentiation among the ENP member states, giving each country the opportunity to develop strong trade and political ties with the EU. Notably, the EU aims to avoid Russia's narrative of a geopolitical struggle, but to reframe it as a matter of international law and the sovereign decision of each Eastern European country to decide upon its own destiny.⁷⁷

The effectiveness of the EU's approach remains to be seen. The EU's discourse highlighting national self-determination may resonate well with the 'sovereignty hawks' among the BRICS, but, as James Sherr has aptly remarked:

“ *While Russia formally respects the sovereignty of its erstwhile republics, it also reserves the right to define the content of that sovereignty and their territorial integrity. Essentially, Putin's Russia has revived the Tsarist and Soviet view that sovereignty is a contingent factor depending on power, culture and historical norms, not an absolute and unconditional principle of world politics.*⁷⁸

The call for sovereign democracy, like the BRICS' penchant for multilateralism, seem little more than an opportunistic tactic, and not a deeply felt commitment. Jonathan Holslag has labelled this approach 'lucrative multilateralism', implying that members only use the BRICS setting if it suits them.⁷⁹

Although the BRICS nations as a collective entity play no major role in Eastern Europe, it is clear that Russia uses this forum (together with the G20) as a geopolitical jimmy to open up the Western front of economic and financial sanctions, and political isolation. China seems happy to oblige, but also has a strong interest in avoiding escalation of the Western-Russian stand-off. China's 'One Belt, One Road' plans (also known as the New Silk Road) will benefit greatly from stable European economic and political conditions; a new Cold War would not serve Beijing's interests at all.⁸⁰ This suggests that China's conservative streak is something that the EU (and the West in general) must cherish. Within the BRICS framework, China can manage and even put a lid on Russia's rhetorical belligerence. This is clearly in the Western strategic interest and should be the basis for a more mature EU strategy towards the BRICS and its individual members.

77 Grzegorz Gromadzki and Bastian Sendhardt, *The Future of the ENP: Some Remarks and Recommendations* (Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, June 2015).

78 James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013), pp. 61–62.

79 Jonathan Holslag, 'The EU and China: The Great Disillusion', *BICCS Asia Paper*, no. 3, November 2006.

80 François Godement, 'One Belt, One Road: China's Great Leap Outward', *ECFR China Analysis*, June 2015.

Conclusion: The Case For Conservatism

As quoted in chapter 1 of this Clingendael Report, the BRICS 'have a strong incentive to be cautious in their approach [to peacekeeping], because disruptions in the global order would harm their own economic growth'. The BRICS are not a consolidated revolutionary force aimed against Western values and interests. At best, the BRICS are (like the EU) a forum aimed at advancing the national interests of its members. The BRICS' coherence, however, remains hampered by conflicts of economic interests, which are deepened by traditional strategic disagreements.

Most BRICS mainly want to be recognized as equal partners at the highest forums of international decision-making. The global veto power of the BRICS is bound to grow, but their proactive force in global politics will remain negligible. On practical security matters, the BRICS rarely act as a group. This diversity also implies that the

BRICS have minimal collective leverage within multilateral forums, and are particularly ineffective on military and security matters. Apart from demanding a larger 'voice' in global governance, the BRICS are overall satisfied with the international system's present functioning and therefore cherish a conservative, rather than revolutionary, vision of the global economy. Still, the EU should not expect these intrinsic divisions to block permanently the development of the BRICS as a strategic actor.

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For the time being, the security implications of the BRICS' mounting confidence and (economic and military) capabilities are rather minor for the EU. The EU's inadequate toolbox for tackling existing problems and challenges should be of much greater concern to European policy-makers. The EU's declining economic and political power makes Europe's vicinity susceptible to the BRICS' influence (and to Chinese influence in particular). For example, China's commitment to the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries (including those receiving Chinese aid and investment) will solidify established regimes, whether (more or less) democratic or not. This also includes Europe proper, as the case of the Western Balkans bears out. Even the lure of EU membership seems unable to put a halt to the growing influence of the BRICS in the Western Balkans, allowing Russia and China (as well as the Gulf states) to use their distinctively non-Western societal norms (based on support for authoritarian democracy) to cater to corrupt political elites in the region.

The growing role of China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) in the MENA region and the Western Balkans owes more to a strategic vacuum left by Western political impotence and strategic neglect than it is the result of careful planning by competing powers. The rise of the BRICS is the geostrategic flipside of the EU's self-inflicted economic and political crisis (mainly because of its misguided euro ambitions) and its failure to develop effective security and defence policies. The BRICS gain influence in Europe and beyond mainly because the EU lacks the economic resources and political will to offer an attractive alternative. Brussels is engaged in a (admittedly modest and unambitious) strategic rethink on these matters, making the rise of the BRICS a key argument for a more cohesive and integrated EU. Still, the EU has no plan and no policies to go beyond the existing strategic partnerships with all five BRICS members.

One may conclude that the three strategic challenges facing the EU because of the rise of the BRICS (as identified above) remain pertinent, but should not be exaggerated. The BRICS nations clearly use their economic power to reach foreign policy goals, which includes decision-making in international forums. They also develop alternatives to Western initiatives and institutions. Yet political cohesion within the BRICS is brittle, and there are many opportunities for the EU to develop constructive security relationships with the BRICS as a group, as well as with individual players. The EU's concern about the rise of radical Islam and Jihadism is shared by Russia and China. Russia's interests and politico-security agenda in the MENA region are conservative, opposing democratization and supporting authoritarian regimes (as long as they are not Sunni, as in Qatar and Saudi Arabia). Although the preferred policies of Russia and China to address this shared strategic challenge may differ, the obvious necessity to work together requires open channels of communication, as well as a chance to avoid the unwelcome rupture dividing 'the West versus the rest'.

This implies that the EU will have to adopt a conservative approach to the BRICS challenge, one that is accommodating to its rise. Most likely, the opposition of several BRICS countries to the EU's values and interests will be temporary, since they benefit greatly from globalization and free trade, and most of them are marching upwards on the so-called 'global value chain'.

China's ambitious New Silk Road initiative will benefit greatly from stable European economic and political conditions; a new era of superpower competition would not serve Beijing's interests at all. To some Chinese observers, the EU is a radical, post-modern power, which needs to be balanced by China's more prudent, conservative approach to world affairs. As Xue Lei has said:

“ *The Chinese approach has been characterized by incrementalism and gradualism, with a marked preference for stability and gradual change in the status quo. At times it has provided a much-needed counterbalance to the radicalism of the Western approach.*⁸¹

All of this suggests that China’s conservative streak is something that the EU (and the West in general) should cherish. Within the BRICS framework, China can manage and could even put a lid on Russia’s rising pugnaciousness. This is clearly in the West’s strategic interest and should be the basis for a more mature EU strategy towards the BRICS group and its individual members.

81 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Policy and Development, 2014), p. 18.

Abbreviations

AFET	(European Parliament's) Foreign Affairs Committee
AiIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CRA	Contingent Reserve Arrangement
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ICANN	Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IS	Islamic State
ITU	(UN) International Telecommunication Union
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINUSMA	(UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NDB	New development Bank
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
PLA	(Chinese) People's Liberation Army
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RP	Responsible Protection
RwP	Responsibility while Protecting
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WTO	World Trade Organization