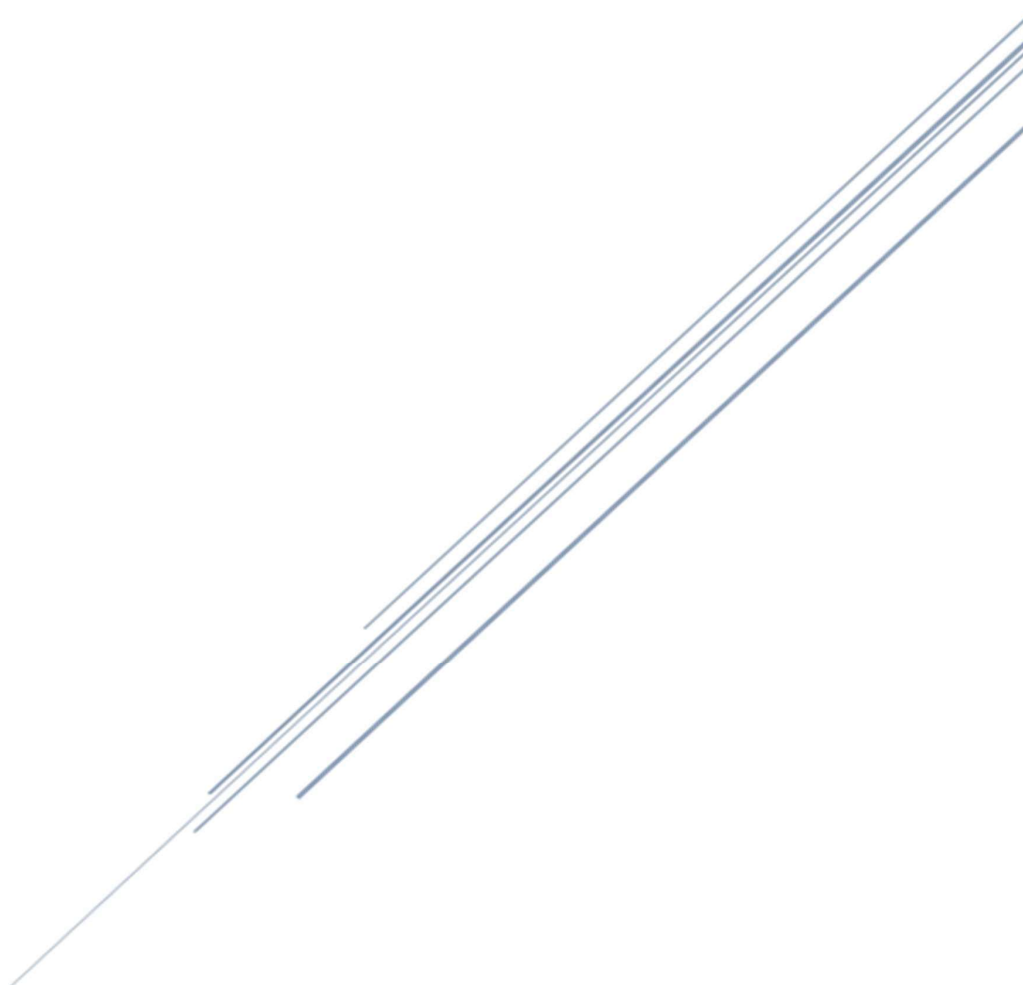


KAZAN

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1. Introduction.

Since Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009, the BRICS group has been holding annual summits that consolidate and register each year of activities and developments under its rotating presidencies. The final text of conclusions has been acquiring progressive relevance as important decisions and initiatives are formally announced and, many times, a corresponding schedule of activities is set. This was the case with the nowadays called New Development Bank, lively discussions having started in a historical and very relevant meeting in Delhi, India, in 2012.

Notwithstanding, this year's meeting, under the Russian presidency, in the historical city of Kazan, surpassed all previous editions. First, four new members, accepted this very year, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates fully participated for the first time¹. Second, criteria for new, associate memberships, including the condition of not using sanctions against third parties, were established, with –out a list of many requests- thirteen new countries accepted in this first stage. Thirdly, important steps were taken in the key effort to disengage from the US dollar in international transactions of all sorts, together with preliminary initiatives aiming at a Global South-influenced reform of the International Monetary System (IMS).

* This text was in part triggered by a (always terse and insightful) short piece by Hung Tran, from the Atlantic Council, Washington DC. It was discussed in a lively seminar at Georgetown University in Qatar. I am indebted to the participants in Doha, including representatives of the diplomatic corps in the country, for their manifold and challenging questions, and particularly to Ambassador Dimitri Alexandrakis, Diplomat-in-Residence at the University, without whose energy and efforts things would not have been possible.

¹ Saudi Arabia, though not having formally accepted membership (as the four others did) yet, did participate in the meeting and related activities.

In a peaceful and constructive atmosphere, in which several bilateral meetings played a key role in driving closer different pairs of members, the summit was masterfully organised and conducted by the Russian hosts. A variety of other thematic initiatives and gatherings took place at the side of the main event.

This Note outlines a few main points and decisions, and elaborates on the why and how the group acquired renewed relevance, with Kazan standing for a game changer in the present world scene.

2. Preliminary geopolitical considerations.

Many analyses fail to acknowledge that –and plenty of discussions on the present world fragmentation do the same, as if ‘fragmentation’ were a god-sent curse on a previously Louis Armstrong’s (what a) wonderful world- most of the present Majority World² reaction was and continues to be triggered and nurtured by the Hegemon’s misbehaviour, since at least the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Its lack of strategic vision and diplomatic sensibility, multiple blunders, coupled with abusive disrespect for international law.

Actually, out of three main drivers that led to Kazan, the first one is the state of flux in a world with a declining super-power -a context in which both the amount of global violence increases and the Hegemon itself becomes more violent. Gramsci – perhaps the political thinker who most dwelled on the idea of the hegemon (though mainly in a domestic politics and cultural context)³- used to say that the more aggressive the Hegemon becomes, the weaker it is. The feeling of its slow loss of power brings insecurity from which ensues irrational, aggressive behaviour in the face of real or, especially, imagined threats.

² This is an alternative formulation of the Global South.

³ Antonio Gramsci, an original philosopher and political thinker natural from Sardinia, Italy, who died in his middle forties, mostly due to long imprisonments during the Mussolini regime. Many, if not most of his writings were produced while in jail.

Another important driver is the generalised fatigue with unbridled globalisation. Though nature persistently tells us that any concept or quality applies –or is beneficial- within limits, the logic of production fragmentation, solely based on profit considerations and helped by the myriad possibilities provided by technology, ran out of control. The covid episode had suddenly shown that advanced economies did not manufacture any more basic hospital and sanitary goods they were in dire need. Dissatisfaction of huge segments of middle-class workers in different countries, who either became redundant or did not accrue the benefits of globalisation, increased the protests. Addition of a zest of security concerns –the misguided leadership- that pushed for friendly- or near-sourcing instead of blind outsourcing was the final touch for retrenchment of a trend that had gone too far. Many countries outside the Incumbent West, which had previously had to adapt themselves to the global value chains imperative, suddenly found themselves alone in the cold.

Thirdly, the declining Hegemon, with cynic double standards and ghastly passive behaviour as regards basic humanitarian and human dignity principles, started to issue sanctions, repeatedly and indiscriminately, with sheer disregard to innocent people, civilian populations and, oftentimes, its own allies!

Sanctions, at least in the trade realm, exist since the Phoenicians and have been studied by several historians. However, the recent ones went so far that even an US think tank coined the neologism weaponisation, to describe the unrestricted practice of transforming any activity where one has a minimum degree of control into a weapon – by denying access, limitations, varied restrictions, sanctioning overall- against real, imagined and potential enemies.

Weaponisation of the IMS, for instance, combined with confiscation of sovereign funds and the unavoidable phasing out of the Bretton Woods institutions, resulted in a System that does not match the interests and needs of the Global South any more.

There is a widespread and increasing perception among the Global South that it is high time for a more active positioning; something clear for the original BRICS members, each, by its own history, an actor of a confusing and usually unfortunate relationship with the dominating powers.

Kazan is the latest sign of this movement.

The Hegemon itself faces internal fault lines and it is uncertain how the conciliation of domestic politics –and a minimal social cohesion- with the by no means easy behaviour in the complex and tense international scene will be achieved. Notwithstanding, the momentum significantly enhanced in Kazan will continue.

A final word on Europe, the saddest and most worrisome element in today's geopolitical metabolism, is due. The perhaps most impressive political experiment of the XX century morphed into a cacophony orchestrated by a non-representative bureaucracy led by presumptuous non-elected executives who tread grounds not belonging to the Commission and seem to believe managing the extremely difficult and delicate progress of the Union fundamentally reduces to conduct a war against Russia.

One of Global South's greatest chagrins is to see that the formerly original and dialogue-driven association that could act as a real counterpoint and a second, or even third alternative to the dangerous excesses of the Hegemon, has failed to tread an autonomous path, being nowadays blurred by a vapid rhetoric and a reluctant, hypocritical international attitude.

Following the perceptive Chinese humour –funnier than those who don't know it imagine- the Global South sees the EU nowadays as the EUS, European United States: an adaptation of the recent Chinese press neologism *mei xi fang*, from *mei guo* (the US) and *xi fang* (the West), to denote an entity made by the US and its main allies ...

Kazan also owns a lot to the unfortunate geopolitical void created by the frustrating posture of the EU.

3. An outline of findings.

Thirty-six countries attended the well-organised meeting, many represented by their heads of state. The general mood was peaceful and constructive. The perhaps most impressive outcome is that 13 countries were invited, and accepted, to become partner or associate members, while around 32 more were left in a queue to acquire this position!

Partner members enjoy an intermediate status and can, in due time, become full members, joining the nine existing ones. They comply with the majority of the requisites to be a BRICS member, which includes supporting the main existing international organisations. Out of the 13 new ones, in a geographical range spanning from Latin America to Central Asia, there are worth mentioning novelties.

The first is Turkey, a NATO member and a geographically strategic nation, close to Europe. Indonesia and Malaysia, key economies and societies, together with other two ASEAN members, Thailand and Vietnam, are also in, making for 4 from this Association. Equally 4 come from Africa, with Nigeria foremost, closing with South Africa the pair of leading African economies in the BRICS.

The final, 32-page and 134-articles long Kazan Declaration⁴, written in a carefully diplomatic style while addressing several issues, from ticklish to standard ones, contains no mention to the Hegemon. It stresses adherence to multi-polarity and a “more representative and fairer international system”. It clearly supports the G20, the UNFCCC and the United Nations and its treaties in general, though pledging for changes in its structure and in the Bretton Woods institutions as well.

From the WTO to sustainable development and the COPs, passing through critical minerals –whose bulk of reserves lies now in the 9+13 group–, nearly all relevant modern questions were addressed, together with pledges for peace and negotiation in Gaza and Ukraine.

The overall tone may surprise those who (wrongly) expected inflammatory or aggressive statements. It is moderate if not even conservative sometimes. An example can be provided by Art. 59, on the key issue of IMS reform, reproduced below:

“We underscore the need to reform the current international financial architecture to meet the global financial challenges including global economic governance to make the international financial architecture more inclusive and just.”

Side bilaterals were noteworthy, with the one between PM Modi and Chairman Xi certainly being the most relevant. After a spell without dialogue, both agreed to disengagement of the remaining friction points in the eastern Ladakh (Indian name)

⁴ The full text can be found in:

https://cdn.brics-russia2024.ru/upload/docs/Kazan_Declaration_FINAL.pdf?1729693488349783 .

border. This has proceeded without a hitch after Kazan and, less than a month after, at the final G20 meeting in Rio, foreign ministers Jaishankar and Wang, from India and China, respectively, furthered the rapprochement by resuming data sharing on trans-border rivers as well as direct flights between both countries; measures to facilitate the mutual concession of visas will also be implemented.

Within the enlarged group, it is expected that bilateral advances like the one above will be more frequent.

Participation of groups of young academics and leaderships, scientists from different fields, varied domestic political parties of several nationalities and specially focussed constituencies was intense.

Finally, it is worth reminding that an important glue that, since the beginning, held together the disparate five countries was that all equally profited from playing the card of a developing country, out of the inner circle of Western Supremacy, centred on the Hegemon. This remains absolutely valid.

4. The two big BRICS.

The much-proclaimed opposition *Pax Sinica* versus *Pax Americana*, with the former, strongly aided by the BRICS, longing to replace the latter, has no solid ground. The Empire of the Middle has never been a global invader or conquistador. For thousands of years of its long history, it has been struggling with a major problem: keep the empire, China itself united.

Those who know a bit of the fascinating and convoluted Chinese saga are aware of the famous synthesis –to some from Tang times’ intellectuals, to others later- of the whole Chinese history: “If the Empire has been split for long, it will be reunified; if it has been united for long, it will fragment”. It rightly conveys the drama of managing, in

a wide space⁵, such a complex civilisation with multiple ethnicities. Something that occupies the bulk of the energy of the State until the present days.

Of course, China wants international room proportional to its size –in all dimensions- and freedom to network, sell and invest around the whole planet (who doesn't?). Doubtless, this poses and will continue to pose problems, given the range of its encompassing dynamics and the ever-existing competition among nations. No wonder the dominating nation is annoyed with this ubiquitous presence and, faithful to the logic of decay, takes it as aggression.

Actually, the very opposition and the idea of substitution between the two '*Pax*' – something dear to (mistakenly) Thucydides-minded analysts- seems part of a rhetoric fuelled by the Hegemon itself, in its long and slow process of losing power.

It is also *naïf* to think that either coalitions would counteract “more aggressive” Russian-Chinese views or that in countries like India, for instance, there could be roots for dissent. There is no leader in this maybe too volatile BRICS-group, and one of the reasons why is that, until now, a legitimate effort to keep an internal harmony and a cooperative, non-confrontational stance has been unanimously adopted.

With its economic and real estate problems, the ever-needed accommodation of the growing middle-class, the constant pressure of keeping its trade performance, together with the ambition to trail a top technological path, China has enough domestic concerns to think of a *Pax Sinica*, something outside the pattern of its international behaviour, since thousands of years ago ...

As regards India, it will always be India. A country/culture that proudly and (at the same time) candidly considers itself superior -even above the Chinese one, with which it competes in antiquity and wisdom- but has always been clever enough to secure and (whenever possible) increase its role as a unique protagonist in the international high table. A path made possible thanks to its extraordinary gift of fixing and pursuing multiple and sometimes conflicting/contradictory alliances -remember Nehru, the Magician. The famous ‘comfort with chaos and ambiguity’ of its negotiators is

⁵ China is the third largest country in the world, below Russia and Canada, both however with vast cold and uninhabited areas.

something hard if not impossible for a Western mind, imbued with Aristotelian, two-valued logic.

A big country as China or Brazil, India, despite all the fuss about its recent economic successes and non-negligible concrete achievements, is still decades behind China in infrastructure, needs to boost its industrial sector and copes with serious basic social problems.

Like China, it needs the BRICS as a safe haven, where together they can play the friendship card, in a less aggressive environment with plenty of opportunities for both. Like China it has been pursuing a bold policy to increase its international economic presence, the last measure being an encompassing effort, *Sagarmanthan*, to lead the country to a top position as regards most aspects of merchant maritime power, from ports and ships construction to innovative solutions to diverse ocean problems.

If, unlike China, it seems to crave more a prominent international role, the subtle differences between them –and the conciliatory mood of the BRICS- is perhaps well illustrated with the episode of the New Development Bank (NDB).

The idea of the Bank was launched by India, during the 2012 Delhi meeting, as mentioned above. Since then, Delhi played a major role within the group in pushing forward the agenda towards its creation. It eventually fully engaged the initially somewhat reluctant Brazil and South Africa, and the more bureaucratically oriented Russia. China was co-operative, while at the same time pursued its project of the AIIB - Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank. It was expected that the NDB would be located in India, a desire of its original proponents, while the AIIB naturally in China. In the end, in 2016, when both institutions began operation, both were located in Shanghai, China. The Chinese with great diplomatic skill supported an Indian (first) president, put down a greater endowment *and got the headquarters location*. Faithful to their capacity to dynamically absorb unwanted outcomes with fair play, and already aiming at new objectives, the Indians went on graciously, as if this had been their wish since 2012.

China and India, with their complementarities and identities, formidable personalities and historical heritage, are likely to enjoy a fairly normal, close to friendly relationship within the BRICS, with positive spill-overs to the world.

5. The axis of evil.

On April 30, 1995, the US imposed trade and financial sanctions on Iran, a measure that has scaled up since and lingers on today, under much tougher terms, nearly thirty years after.

The history of this sequence of embargoes is full of hesitations and mistakes of the US foreign policy, including having profited from a friendly Iran in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, which opened its skies to the ensuing US operations. Even so, in the presidential State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, George W. Bush coined the 'Axis of Evil' group, including Iran, Iraq and North Korea, from then on denominated as 'demons' worse than other enemies usually qualified as rogue states.

Despite this, in the July/August 2012 issue of Foreign Affairs, Kenneth Waltz in 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb' reasonably argues in favour of such a strategy, encouraging international dialogue and not forgetting to pledge for the end of sanctions that "primarily harm ordinary Iranians, with little purpose".

It is perhaps by this time (a little more than ten years ago) that the Hegemon came to the full decision to choose Israel as its only representative, free-hands and supported ally in the Middle East, cancelling any opportunity or format leading to a wider and wiser arrangement, and nurturing a process that led to the present outrageous situation.

Without entering into details and arguments on Iran's international behaviour, it seems fair to say that the Iranian population has been enduring hardly justified mistreatment and lack of understanding by the Incumbent West. The clear goal, certainly since the last decade, with the increase of far-fetched sanctions, is to isolate and break the country, depriving it of the right to choose its own destiny. A pariah, unable to entertain relations with the majority of the international community.

Inclusion of Iran in the enlarged BRICS though no panacea is close to a boon, a key and symbolic gesture, an important aid in engaging it in normal and open exchanges with a diversified community. It enlarges its opportunities for development and newer

communications: to be present in different BRICS fora opens doors to new ventures and joint initiatives.

Though Iran's example is an extreme one, it is in mitigating anomalies as this one that BRICS has gained stature and momentum, signalling that an alternative approach to differences and even conflict is possible, respecting the sovereignty and the rights of the suffering civilian populations that bear no relationship to the vagaries of the great game.

6. Conclusion: a game changer?

No wonder Kazan was a true, undeniable success and BRICS gained considerably more weight. The international community, including the West and its associated institutions, took notice of the Summit.

What next?

BRICS is a fuzzy entity; what has provided great advantages in terms of its survival at the same time poses problems, depending on the roles it wants to incorporate. Until now, multilateralism cum multi-polarity continues to be a strong point, as well as support –if changes are set in motion- of the United Nations basic core and related treaties.

Within the group, there is less conflict –though it of course exists- and less opposite positions as the Western press proclaims.

It is not either a key vehicle for *Pax Sinica* (see section 3 above), as the strong internal dissimilarity –especially in the new enlarged format- pre-empts the predominance of even a powerful actor, or use as a platform for those discontent with the global scene. Quite on the contrary, it opens a forum for constructive dialogues between not necessarily close friends, as the recent and relevant China-India developments testify, and is the source of concrete, important measures, concerning needed changes in the global order.

The political dynamics in specific countries, either in the North as it will happen coming January in the US, or later, in members like Brazil, where a less BRICS-enthusiast faction might come to power, of course impact specific trajectories or alter the speed of some transformations. The same may apply to the Republic of Korea, the EU or even Japan, reinforcing or not the scope and acceptance of the BRICS. Nevertheless, the global momentum seems to have gained considerable autonomy.

A geopolitical reconfiguration is in progress, despite no clear, or even a less unstable scenario can be envisaged. A serious, deep engagement for peace and enhanced dialogue is mandatory, as the best one can hope in the near future is that violence and the destruction brought by war will be kept relatively under control.

In this persistent global state of flux, due to linger for the coming years, the enlarged BRICS group, with its peaceful approach –be it in the relations among countries, be it in the desired evolutions for the international system- offers a reasonable and neither too ambitious nor bureaucratic alternative. No member is perfect or free from criticism, not all ideas and proposals are without flaws, but together they are building up a broadly positive, anti-violence alternative.

This became evident in Kazan: in this way, it was a game-changer.