

BRICS Approaches to Security Multilateralism

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Despite the onset of pessimism about the economic prospects of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) association, the grouping continues to attract significant attention as a potential source of concerted counterbalancing policies vis-à-vis the developed world. BRICS members have positioned themselves as aspiring nations capable of sustaining high levels of economic growth without excessive dependence on developed countries. They also claim to embody the promise of independent foreign policy and security strategies based on their distinct understanding of national interest and seek to rally around BRICS a group of developing countries supposedly in the process of choosing between alliance with the West and largely self-reliant economic and diplomatic strategies. In the wake of a major bout of confrontation with the West over Ukraine, Russia may push for raising the profile of BRICS as a vehicle for the coordination of international strategy. It is therefore important to establish the extent to which BRICS as a multilateral institution can be beefed up with substance in the field of security policy. This article seeks to contribute to such analysis by examining the prospects of a concerted BRICS approach to multilateral diplomacy and collective action in the international arena.

The foreign policy aspirations of BRICS countries are heavily focused on their respective neighborhoods. As a result, key foreign and security policy goals of BRICS are either specific to each member country or—as in the case of China and India—mutually opposed. On the eve of the April 2013 BRICS summit in South Africa, the *Hindustan Times* editorialized that “foreign policy relations among these countries remain shaky—and at times seriously lacking in trust. The most obvious divide is between India and China. The flip side is that relations between, say, India and Brazil or South Africa and

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Russia are so thin as to be invisible. Other than China, . . . members are regional to the point they have little contact with each other.”¹ In addition, resources available to BRICS nations for engagement in the geographic and functional areas not considered of critical importance for their security or economic development are limited. Overall, one has good reason not to expect BRICS nations to pool resources and political will in pursuit of ingenious global initiatives.

Yet, despite the lack of taste for concerted global activism, BRICS may still find it worthwhile to join efforts in balancing the influence of developed nations. Indeed, each BRICS country is concerned with Western preponderance in a certain area—from the quality of diplomacy to the ability to project force to the cutting-edge military technology. In other words, if anything can spur security multilateralism among BRICS members, it would be their positioning in relation to economically and technologically advanced states.

More specifically, security relationships—including cooperation and competition—among BRICS nations are largely defined by their approach to the economic, military, technological, and other advantages of the United States and its allies. For example, Russia and China routinely declare that they coordinate security policies primarily in order to “promote a multipolar world” and “oppose hegemony”—a euphemism for counterbalancing the United States in the international arena (see their Friendship, Cooperation, and Good Neighborliness Treaty of 2001). Brazil has a record of resisting the United States’ push for Pan-American economic integration, and India has consistently balked at US demands to forfeit nuclear weapons. One possible exception to this rule is the India-China dyad in which both sides have been driven mostly by the motives specific to their regional rivalry, dating back at least several decades.

Sometimes one or more BRICS members develop a particularly strong interest in harnessing the group to their anti-Western cause. As of mid-2015, Russia is seeking closer coordination with its BRICS counterparts, especially China, given the inflaming conflict with the West over Ukraine, Russia’s expulsion from the G8, and—potentially—other multilateral fora.²

This article proceeds in three steps. First, it classifies typical BRICS responses to the West’s security policies and the West’s bid for a technological and diplomatic edge over BRICS. They are represented in this analysis by the three largest nations with the most ambitious foreign policy agendas: China, Russia, and India. To compare Chinese, Russian, and Indian response options, the article uses a two-dimensional chart. Second, it introduces a parameter allowing the detection of trends in the evolution of these postures. This parameter is the perceived direction of the evolution of US influence in the world. The article seeks to establish how the onset of pessimism with regards to US (and, more generally, Western) power has affected strategic choices of BRICS countries as they hammer out responses to Western preponderance in diplomacy and military technology. Finally, it assesses the prospects for BRICS security multilateralism on the basis of an understanding of how the “Western decline” has affected the strategic calculus of BRICS nations.

BRICS Responses to Western Security Policies

Several types of Western capabilities and policies have generated concerns among BRICS countries since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This article considers three such types: (1) advanced weapon technology and related military strategy, (2) conflict-management strategies, and (3) innovation in foreign policy doctrine. Contentious issues in *military technology* include US and allied attempts at deploying missile defense capabilities; advances in the field of high-precision conventional arms, including those potentially deployable in space; and the bid by the United States and allies to tighten the nuclear nonproliferation regime while pushing for significant cuts in the world's largest nuclear arsenals. The dimensions of *international conflict-management strategies* championed by the West and raising concerns among BRICS include armed intervention to end violent conflict (e.g., a civil war); threats to politically isolate, economically sanction, or punish by force one of the sides in an internal conflict (with the balance usually tipping in favor of other sides as a result); loose interpretations of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandate to intervene in conflicts (from a perspective popular in Moscow and Beijing, during the civil war in Libya in 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] took the liberty to extend its mandate from protecting civilians to chasing down and defeating the Libyan government forces); and official recognition of a secessionist regime, as happened with Kosovo in 2008. Finally, Western *doctrinal shifts* occurring over the last two decades and troubling most of the BRICS members include the reinvented notions of solidarity with people suffering from government abuse in foreign countries; activist interpretations of the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle; assertions about the universal character of human rights; and engagement between Western governments and opposition movements and political activists in developing nations.

Overall, the three areas—technological, strategic, and doctrinal—in which Western-led innovations irritate Russia, China, and, to an extent, India are closely interconnected. BRICS concerns involve the potential use of cutting-edge, high-precision weapons against government forces “under the pretext” of ending internal armed conflicts or punishing a targeted government for a massive violation of human rights. Mainstream international affairs analysts in Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi consider humanitarian concerns a smokescreen for actions aimed at achieving “geopolitical advantages,” securing access to “strategic resources,” or installing “puppet governments” in “strategically important” countries. BRICS reactions to the worrisome developments in Western technology, strategy, and doctrine have so far fallen into four major categories.

Asymmetric Measures

First, the “big three” members of BRICS have tried to offset the advantage of the West by undertaking asymmetric measures. For example, concerned with potential implications of US missile defense deployments for the viability of Russia's strategic deterrent, Moscow began upgrading its mobile strategic nuclear missiles—a capability least susceptible to a surprise first disarming strike. It also commissioned a new heavy, liquid-fuel

ballistic missile considered very effective in penetrating missile defenses. Russian leadership also promised to deploy short-range missiles in the country's westernmost exclave of Kaliningrad, one purpose of such missiles being to target potential missile defense sites in Poland. According to Washington, over the last several years, Russia has also been testing—allegedly in violation of the US-Russian Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987—a medium-range ground-launched cruise missile. If deployed, such missiles could raise the stakes for European NATO members in a confrontation with Russia and possibly discourage them from allowing deployment of elements of the US missile defense architecture on their territory. China has equally excelled in hammering out asymmetric responses to the United States' technological preponderance in a number of areas of significance to China. Beijing has developed effective means of countering domination by the US Navy of ocean waters adjacent to China (e.g., with high-precision antiship ballistic missiles). In 2007 China also demonstrated that it is capable of destroying US satellites in orbit by hitting a decommissioned satellite with a missile.

It is equally easy to find examples of asymmetric responses to armed interventionism. These have included diplomatic support and supplies by Russia to the Bashar Assad government in Syria and Russian and Chinese attempts to shield Iran from the toughening of extra-UN sanctions proposed by the United States and its allies. Since the overthrow of Col Mu'ammar Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, Russia and—to a smaller extent—China have wasted no opportunity in multilateral fora to assign blame for the less-than-perfect security situation in Libya on NATO countries that arguably stretched the limits of their mandate (based on UNSC Resolution 1973) and bombed the Gadhafi forces into complete annihilation.

Western doctrine innovation—the concepts of solidarism, universal human rights, and R2P even in the absence of UNSC approval—has also elicited a distinct asymmetric response. At different times, Chinese, Indian, and Russian authorities took care to limit the freedom of maneuver for both local and transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGO) commonly viewed in these countries as agents of hostile Western influence disguised as promotion of universal rights or values. Beijing enforces restrictions on the registration of both national and foreign NGOs pursuing goals considered politically sensitive. For example, in China it is impossible to incorporate an NGO that has not secured initial funding for its programs from the Chinese government.³ Beijing also requires notarization by Chinese embassies of all grant agreements between donors in the respective country and a Chinese recipient NGO.⁴ Furthermore, the Chinese government seeks to divert foreign charitable funding from relatively independent NGOs to those largely loyal to or acting on behalf of the authorities.⁵

In a similar vein, Moscow has toughened regulations for foreign-funded NGOs in 2012, ended the presence in Russia of the US Agency for International Development, and discontinued the US-financed Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiative aimed at deactivating and destroying decommissioned nuclear warheads in Russia.⁶ The general climate for NGO activities in Russia has deteriorated, with multiple voices calling for a further crackdown on the recipients of foreign financial support—even in the

field of education and research. Even in India—a country with a solid record of conducting free and fair elections and maintaining a decent level of government transparency—the authorities undertook restrictive measures against foreign-funded NGOs. This action occurred in 2013 in the aftermath of a wave of environmentalist activism to impede the construction of an atomic power station at Kudankulam. However, the blanket suspension of the right to receive funds from abroad affected more than 700 Indian NGOs, most of which never engaged in antinuclear advocacy.⁷

Legal or Ethical Constraints

The second Russian and Chinese strategy to neutralize the West's perceived technological preponderance as well as unwelcome strategic and doctrinal innovation is to impose legal or ethical constraints on Western behavior through multilateral or bilateral conventions or diplomacy. For example, Russia countered US advances in high-precision conventional strategic weapons by insisting, during negotiations on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 2009–10, that intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads be counted towards the general limits on these missiles along with nuclear-tipped carriers. Together with China, Russia introduced to the Conference on Disarmament in 2008 a draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space. So far the draft has received only a lukewarm reaction from the United States while Russia has tried to up the ante by committing itself unilaterally to the principle of “no first placement” of weapons in outer space.⁸ Moscow also continues to insist on a binding agreement with the United States that would impose constraints on the development of high-precision conventional arms and missile defense systems. Alternatively, Russia tried in 2010–11 to convince the US Congress to issue a declaration to the effect that US missile defenses would never be directed against Russia. Neither initiative got traction in the United States because Washington did not want to constrain its own progress in the promising areas of military technology or limit its freedom of hands in potential uses of that technology.

In its turn, India seeks to legitimize its possession of nuclear weapons outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework by calling for abolishing nuclear weapons that would be the condition for New Delhi to forfeit its own nuclear arsenal. Otherwise, India insists on being accepted into the NPT on a “nondiscriminatory” basis—that is, as a nuclear-weapon state.

China and Russia have a long-time record of resisting Western interventionism through multilateral diplomacy. Both sides have vetoed or threatened to veto resolutions opening up avenues for intervention in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Syria. Moscow and Beijing have relentlessly asserted the indispensability of a UNSC mandate for intervening into sovereign states, even in situations when a veto by a permanent UNSC member state could prevent the international community from immediately halting an armed conflict in order to save thousands of lives. In a bid to stall the expansion of NATO in Europe, Russia proposed in 2008—and subsequently promoted through diplomatic

channels—a draft European security treaty that would require consultations among stakeholders in case of conflict escalation in Europe and that would prohibit expansion of military alliances in the absence of consensus among the treaty’s signatories. Russia, China, and India have also refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. In that decision, China and India were driven mostly by unwillingness to set a precedent of a successful secession while Russia was motivated mostly by sympathies towards Serbia and the inclination to counterbalance the United States and its allies. (Moscow subsequently used Kosovo independence as an argument to justify its own recognition of Georgia’s breakaway republics as well as the secession of Crimea from Ukraine and its acceptance into the Russian Federation.)

Russia, China, and—at times—India have countered Western doctrinal innovation by developing and promoting their own concepts. They have argued that sovereignty is one of the few powerful stabilizers in world politics along with the balance of forces—that is, prevention of “hegemony” by any single state. Since 2004—the year of the first wave of “colored” revolutions in post-Soviet Eurasia—Moscow has also actively promoted the narrative of the inevitable involvement of hostile external forces into any mass antigovernment protests or other activity by radical opposition. Russia has maintained that there is no way for a radical mass protest to muster human and material support other than to receive it from a foreign nation that seeks deviously to undermine the government in the country where the protest is taking place. Both narratives proved robust responses to the West’s transnational solidarism rhetoric and gained traction among a number of developing nations with vulnerable regimes concerned about potential interference by the West.

Indeed, to practice the legal-constraints strategy, a stakeholder needs to maintain a degree of global participation. A state cannot work any constraints through the UN or even a narrower group of its allies if this state is not engaged with the world. Although an internationally isolated (or self-isolated) actor will usually be capable of delivering an asymmetric response to its rivals, the legal-constraints strategy is impossible or ineffective for such an actor. If a country is shifting towards (self-)isolation, it forfeits the legal-constraints option.

Symmetrical or Matching Strategies

As the three key BRICS countries grew stronger economically and militarily over the last decade, they attempted a number of symmetrical or matching strategies whereby they tried to deploy against the West the mirror images of the West’s own policies. For example, as one of the ways to offset the potential impact of nascent US missile defenses on strategic nuclear stability between the United States and Russia, Moscow announced (in 2011) the formation of Airspace Defense Forces (*Sily Voennno-kosmicheskoi oborony* [VKO]) and earmarked tens of billions of dollars in funding over the next decade. The United States did not raise and Moscow did not comment on the question of whether these forces were about to affect the vaunted strategic stability in a negative way. In its turn,

India continues to develop nuclear weapons while remaining outside the NPT framework and claiming that membership and nonmembership in the NPT are indeed two equally accepted choices, neither of which is more ethical than the other.

Russia mirrored Western interventionism by engaging with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea, recognizing them after conflicts to which Moscow was party. Moscow also used the solidarism doctrine to project force onto Crimea and threaten its use against Ukraine in the wake of the February 2014 revolution in Kiev. China indeed continues to lay claims to Taiwan and extend its own peculiar interpretation of international maritime law to the adjacent seas—its own zones of possible intervention under certain circumstances.

Russia reciprocated Western doctrinal innovation by deploying R2P to justify its claims to Crimea and—potentially—parts of eastern Ukraine. According to Moscow, Russian “compatriots” in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were put at risk by the policies of new Ukrainian authorities that allegedly sought to discriminate against ethnic Russians and the Russian language in Ukraine. The Kremlin also justified its actions in relation to Ukraine by citing the Kosovo case, in which the United States supported the principle of self-determination by Kosovo Albanians—both in the run-up to and after the declaration of independence by Priština in 2008.⁹

Cooperation with the West

The final option for the BRICS “big three” to respond to the West’s preponderance is to cooperate with the West. Such cooperation has never come in the form of bandwagoning but occurred on an ad hoc basis. Upon entering the “nuclear club,” India chose to cooperate—to an extent—with the United States by signing a Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2005. As a result of the deal, New Delhi secured engagement by Washington in developing India’s civilian nuclear energy sector—a lucrative opportunity for the United States. While remaining outside the NPT framework, India has traditionally supported the nuclear disarmament agenda of the Obama administration.¹⁰

Russia, in its turn, cooperated with the United States and US allies on Syria’s chemical disarmament that helped to partly defuse the conflict in and around Syria. China, along with a few other developing nations, took part in antipiracy patrolling around the Horn of Africa, a mission that turned out to be an indisputable success of multilateral cooperation. Finally, in March 2011, Moscow resolved not to veto UNSC Resolution 1973, which recognized the need to protect civilians in the Libyan city of Benghazi after it came under threat of cleansing by the forces of Colonel Gadhafi. The table below summarizes three challenges and examples of four response options to them by the BRICS “big three.”

Table. Responses by BRICS to the West's technological, strategic, and doctrinal innovation

<i>Response Challenge</i>	<i>Asymmetric</i>	<i>Legal Constraints</i>	<i>Matching Strategies</i>	<i>Cooperation</i>
<i>Advanced military technology: missile defense / high-precision weapons / "space weapons," nuclear weapons; non-proliferation regime for India</i>	Mobile missiles, antisatellite weapons, new cruise missiles, China's antisatellite test (2007), high-precision antiship missiles	Inclusion of conventional weapons into strategic arms limits, a treaty proposal on non-weaponization of outer space, Indian calls for abolishing nuclear weapons or integration into NPT on a nondiscriminatory basis (as a nuclear-weapon state)	Establishment of airspace defense forces in Russia, Russian upgrade of its own conventional weapons, Indian development of nuclear weapons while being NPT non-signatory	Indian signing of the 2005 nuclear agreement with the United States, support for global nuclear disarmament initiatives
<i>Conflict management: Syria, Libya, Georgia, Kosovo</i>	Arming the incumbent regime in Syria, resistance to the toughening of sanctions against Iran, assigning blame for the postintervention chaos in Libya to NATO	Vetoing UNSC resolutions on intervention or helping opposition to the government in internal conflicts, asserting the indispensability of UNSC mandate for intervention, proposals for multilateral binding treaties prohibiting the expansion of rival blocs (European Security Charter), attempting to prevent the recognition of Kosovo and enforce strict rules of peacemaking	Russian intervention into conflict in Georgia and Ukraine, Chinese claims to Taiwan	Russian brokering of Syria's chemical disarmament, Chinese participation in the antipiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden
<i>Doctrine innovation: notions of solidarity, transnational approaches to human rights and R2P, engagement with opposition movements and activists</i>	Constraining NGO activity (Russia), restricting foreign funding of NGOs (China, India)	Promoting rival narratives of unconditional respect for sovereignty as the only stabilizer in the international system and of external involvement into any antigovernment protest	Russian display of solidarity with "compatriots" in Ukraine and upholding the principle of self-determination	Russian support of UNSCR 1973 in March 2011 to protect civilians in Libya

Detecting Trends in Chinese, Russian, and Indian Approaches

Systematization of the West's challenges and BRICS responses helps one understand the range of options available to China, Russia, and India for multilateral coordination vis-à-vis the United States and its allies. However, the table above does not provide insight into the evolution of Chinese, Russian, and Indian approaches to such coordination. To track that evolution and determine how much the three BRICS countries are inclined to coordinate their policies regarding the West, we can consider how the concept of an imminent decline of the West as an economic and diplomatic powerhouse influences them. Doing so will give us an understanding of the direction in which the preferred posture of each of the three BRICS countries is evolving and how far apart the three postures are likely to be in the foreseeable future. Such analysis will also highlight the dramatic choice that emerges between balancing and cooperating with the West amid expectations of the West's approaching and irreversible decline.

In the West itself, this pessimism has largely abated since it peaked in 2009–10. However, many decision makers in Russia, China, and India seem to act on the assumption that the decline of the West will continue. For example, it is difficult to imagine how Russian policy makers would have agreed to incorporate Crimea into Russia—a move with slim prospects of being recognized as legitimate by Western nations—if such a decision were not premised on the expectation of the deterioration of Western power in the foreseeable future. One can only plan to dismiss the opinion of the United States and its allies if one is convinced that the material consequences of such disagreement will quickly diminish with time.

An analysis of trends in the evolution of responses by China, Russia, and India to the West's policies since the onset of global economic crisis in 2009 shows that each of the three players has chosen its distinct path in relationship with the West. India's concern with challenges emanating from the United States and its policies is limited. New Delhi does not regard Washington as a "strategic rival" and prefers to respond to regional threats by developing India's own symmetrical capabilities. However, these capabilities are not directed against the United States or its allies in Europe or Asia; rather, they are designed to deter two different rivals—China and Pakistan. Such capabilities are increasingly prized by Indian policy makers in a world where the United States is perceived as decreasingly capable of guaranteeing stability in key regions and the security of its allies. India is definitely not ready to exercise power and pick a fight not only with the United States but also with its regional rival China. As indicated by the authors of a seminal volume on international worldviews of "aspiring powers,"

India's post-Independence foreign policy was overwhelmingly dominated by Nehru in conceptual development and practice. The hallmark of Nehru's thinking was its eclectic and expansive nature, understanding that power matters in international relations, but unwilling to let India become entangled in outside conflicts that would lead to Indian loss of blood and treasure, and perhaps even more important, erode India's autonomy and

close off India's options. . . . India still seems to place a good deal of stock on its "power by example" as a way of gaining the global status.¹¹

This "power by example" is not so much balancing power but a show of willingness to engage with the international community (including the West) and contribute—moderately—to certain common causes that have not been fully defined by India and, as many policy makers in Russia or China would say, were "imposed" by the West.

India is disinclined to engage in multilateral efforts aimed at constraining the developed countries' progress in technology—for example, in missile defense and strategy/doctrine innovation such as humanitarian intervention based on the R2P principle. Overall, "on global policy, India is likely to keep moving toward multilateral approaches, but given that alliances and use of force are perceived as near taboos across the board, Indian activism on the global stage is going to be much less than what other major powers, especially the United States, might expect from India."¹² Moreover, Indian thinking has an influential pessimistic streak about the viability of BRICS as a vehicle for multilateral action. Ruchir Sharma, a senior executive of Indian origin at Morgan Stanley, noted in 2013 that "India's economic interests are more closely aligned with the US than with the other Brics [*sic*]. A major importer of oil and other commodities, India stands to benefit like the US from falling commodity prices, which are hurting major commodity exporters like Russia, Brazil and South Africa."¹³

Indeed, Indian observers praised Russia and President Vladimir Putin for the ability to find an ingenious and constructive solution to the Syrian chemical weapons impasse. As the deal involving Syrian president Bashar Assad, Putin, and US president Barack Obama was being sealed, the Hindu editors opined that "[Putin's] attempt marks one of the most politically savvy gestures by a head of state to reach across the aisle to a foreign audience in recent years." At the same time, the commentators providentially noted that "the power struggle between the U.S. and Russia on this issue will continue unabated."¹⁴ As the Crimea crisis was unfolding in March 2014, Indian commentators were worrying that, if Russia were allowed by the West to play hardball in the Ukraine crisis, China might become emboldened to "unilaterally extend its sphere of influence."¹⁵ India's concern was of a conspicuously regional nature—not with the possibility of a bout of confrontation between the world's major powers but with the opportunity that the crisis might present to India's regional security rival, China, that already annexed parts of the Indian Territory as a result of the 1962 war. During and immediately after the Crimea crisis, New Delhi kept reiterating the principle of territorial integrity to be applied on a global scale.

Since the onset of the world financial crisis in 2008–9, China has been shifting to a more proactive policy, looking for ways to balance US power in the Western Pacific, outer space, and cyberspace. In the domain of Chinese foreign policy discourse, this stance has been reflected by the growing influence of the realist school of thought that emphasizes great-power bargaining and pragmatism in foreign relations.¹⁶ Realists are

suspicious of US and EU [European Union] calls for cooperation as ruses for entrapment. They reject concepts and policies of globalization, transnational challenges, and global governance. They argue that American and European attempts to enlist greater Chinese involvement in global management and governance is [*sic*] a dangerous trap aimed at tying China down, burning up its resources, and retarding its growth.¹⁷

For China, multilateralism is a cover for imposing someone else's will on China. Beijing prefers bilateralism or uses multilateralism to promote its own bilateral goals (legitimizes bilateral decisions through a multilateral framework). The flip side of this approach is that China is left with only limited ability to pursue the legal-constraint strategy by using the power of international institutions to forestall unwanted policy or technological advances by the developed countries. Yet, Beijing sometimes enjoys multilateral diplomacy in the UN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—mostly in a nonbinding form and when support from like-minded countries is guaranteed—while avoiding multilateral frameworks in which decisions can be enforced despite China's will or in which Beijing can be held accountable for some of its actions.¹⁸

As the above record of China's moves vis-à-vis the United States and its Asian allies shows, in recent years Beijing has been inclined to pursue asymmetrical-response strategies. This approach occurred as Chinese policy makers' conviction about the decline of American power was on a steady rise. China has been preoccupied with ensuring incremental shifts in the regional status quo in Beijing's favor and was careful enough not to advance beyond certain "red lines." China also refrained from a frontal assault on the United States, preferring to test the boundaries of international maritime law in the South China Sea or to deploy defensive weapons such as ballistic antiship missiles or cruise missiles, intended to deny the US Navy access to China's littoral seas. Unlike Russia, Beijing has not attempted dangerous foreign policy gambits by faking irrational behavior in order to raise the credibility of its commitment to defeating the enemy. Indeed, China's asymmetrical responses have so far implied readiness to escalate up to only a certain—usually predictable—level.

In its turn, Russia has been torn since 2009 between sporadic cooperation with the West (e.g., on Syria's chemical disarmament in 2013) and taking on the West directly (first and foremost, in Ukraine in 2014–15). Since 2010 Moscow has also been bragging about the loss of interest in further dialogue on security issues with the "weakened EU" and about its conviction regarding the imminent loss of US global influence. As official rhetoric during the Crimea crisis has demonstrated, Russia aspires for nothing less than a rewrite of the *modus operandi* of the post-Cold War international order. Making an unusually high bet, Russia now demands recognition of its own "sphere of influence" demarcated by the presence of "compatriots"—people who use Russian as one of the main languages in everyday communication and feel affinity towards the Russian culture. President Putin equated refusal to grant such "sphere" to Russia with unrelenting pressure on Russia and Western attempts at cornering Moscow.¹⁹ Russia's direct assault on US positions in post-Soviet Eurasia has so far not been fully acceptable to China and India, even if Beijing and New Delhi have exercised caution and acknowledged that the

issues at stake are much more important for Moscow than for Washington and that the Kremlin has a few valid (albeit insufficient) arguments to justify its actions.

Conclusion

The prospects for ambitious multilateral security cooperation among the three largest BRICS members aimed at counterbalancing Western power look limited. India has appeared unwilling and unable to challenge consistently the developed nations while China and Russia have occasionally come together to oppose US policy on Iran, Syria, missile defense, or humanitarian intervention. At the same time, for China each of these instances has not been as much a “matter of principle” as it has been for Russia. Over the last several years, China has been prepared to escalate only up to a point at which its overall dynamic of relations with the United States would not be threatened. In its turn, Russia has increasingly braced itself for a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies and has been trying to test Washington’s resolve on matters of principle—apparently in the belief that the White House will eventually blink. Crises around Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014–15 are clear examples of that trend. At the same time, Russia has made several attempts at cooperation with the United States—both ad hoc and across the board (the US–Russian “reset” in general as well as the transit to and from Afghanistan and sanctions against Iran as stand-alone issues). At the moments of cooperation, Moscow perceived strengthening ties with the weakening Washington as a good hedge against China’s potential expansionism. Yet, as of mid-2015, any such strengthening seems a foregone option. China and Russia will likely continue to cooperate on promoting legal constraints on Western power and leadership in multilateral fora—first and foremost, the United Nations and its agencies. However, doing so will not imply a united front to oppose the United States and its allies across the board.

Notes

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