

Oliver Stuenkel. *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. 213 pp.

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Contemporary global politics finds itself mired in complex political contestations and economic convulsions. Multilateralism, once heralded as the organising liberal principle of the post-Cold War order, is now facing a trust deficit in both representational legitimacy and institutional effectiveness. Over the years, rising and middle powers have sought to reconsider and recalibrate existing institutional structures in advocating for a global order that moves beyond Western hegemony to embrace the rising status of the Global South.

Against this broader debate over reform and representation, Brazilian scholar Oliver Stuenkel offers a detailed and empirically rich account of BRICS as a coalition of emerging powers. Stuenkel aims to provide what he deems to be the “first definitive reference history” and a critical historical biography for BRICS.³ Grounded in the grouping of five countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the book explores how these countries seek to expand their voice within existing institutions of global governance such as United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, while exploring parallel avenues of financial autonomy through BRICS-led initiatives such as New Development Bank and Contingency Reserve Arrangement.

In *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order*, Stuenkel begins from a sceptical commonplace, whether the acronym is simply in pursuit of a common program even as it struggles to coalesce around ideological coherence. Citing Martin Wolf’s argument that the grouping seems to have little in common beyond anti-Western sentiment, Stuenkel embraces this heterogeneity rather than denying it. The core puzzle of his work thus analyses how materially rising yet politically and economically diverse BRICS nations converge meaningfully to project collective relevance in global politics.⁴

The central narrative, therefore, hinges on whether the BRICS countries are reformist or revisionist in character. In this aspect, Stuenkel is deliberately cautious, arguing that they seek to “make the boat wider, not rock it over.”⁵ He highlights the status-quoist nature of BRICS which focuses more on the equality within Western liberal institutions rather than seeking to overthrow and create a counter hegemonic alliance.⁶ This can be theoretically interpreted as a strategy of reformist hedging: BRICS nations thus attempt to widen representation and diversify power within global governance structures rather than impose a revisionist challenge upon the existing order.

While Stuenkel traces the rise of BRICS to positive projections by leading investment banking firm Goldman Sachs and British economist Jim O’Neill, it wasn’t until the financial crisis of 2008 that BRICS was able to push its institutional legitimacy as an emerging counterpart to Western economic architecture.⁷ The book states how “short periods of reduced legitimacy in global governance can

³ Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 11.

⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁵ Ibid, 156.

⁶ Ibid, 166.

⁷ Ibid, 1.

quickly lead to the rise of alternative institutions.”⁸ In essence, Stuenkel aptly argues how BRICS nations transformed the watershed of the financial crisis into an opportunity converting their relative resilience into bargaining leverage as agenda shapers in the world order.

A two-plank rationale thus motivated the BRICS grouping as it sought to diversify its partnerships while resisting attempts by the United States (US) to maintain a unipolar privileged position in the global order. The formation of New Development Bank and Contingency Reserve Arrangement forms the basis of this duality as these institutions sought to diversify development finance while simultaneously reducing dependence on Western conditionality. However, Stuenkel does not portray these initiatives as revisionist replacement to the Bretton Woods institutions⁹, but as alternative paradigms expanding the overall bargaining capacity of BRICS within the existing order.

Summitry became a symbol of recognition, and an empirical demonstration of increasing informal cooperation amongst BRICS nations. Stuenkel on the other hand highlights how the group displayed “continued degree of informality and low degree of institutionalization”, stating that the looseness within BRICS was not a weakness but instead a survival strategy of these politically divergent countries to evade diplomatic costs of binding commitments.¹⁰ This was particularly important given the stark regime differences of democracy versus authoritarianism amongst the member states. Here, even as Stuenkel acknowledges the democratic peace debates, he states how functional cooperation has persisted amongst BRICS nations overriding concerns of ideological alignment.¹¹ Thin cooperation rather than thick cooperation thus pervades the general pattern of coherence within BRICS nations.

Sovereignty politics is another important element of Stuenkel's arguments. The reformist rhetoric towards multilateralism by BRICS is reflected in the scepticism towards ‘Responsibility to Protect’ as a Western endeavour, particularly in the context of intervention in Libya.¹² The stress test is the occurrence of the 2014 Crimean crisis; it is here that BRICS can be seen resorting to careful hedging, refusing Western attempts at coercive diplomacy against Russia, yet avoiding outright support for Russia's actions.¹³ A critical question emerges: is this a proof of BRICS united stance against Western hegemony, or simply a calibration aimed at independent self-interest? Strategic flexibility by the BRICS nations is mainly interpreted through the lens of self-interested state actors, not necessarily involving cooperation around a cohesive normative stance. As Stuenkel notes, Brazil, for instance, is sceptical of sanctions as a form of punishment, yet even more sceptical of the USA as a norm setter for determining international standards. The Crimean case and its response by BRICS reflected a stance of realist convenience rather than liberal coherence.

Stuenkel welcomed South Africa's inclusion as a gateway to African representation and in strengthening solidarity towards the grouping's joint decision-making. On the other hand, continued enlargement of the grouping has also created internal inconsistencies; members such as Egypt and

⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁹ Ibid, 118.

¹⁰ Ibid, 159.

¹¹ Ibid, 60, 89.

¹² Ibid, 141-142.

¹³ Ibid, 154.

Ethiopia remain locked in conflict over the Nile, while Iran's political and economic instability has produced fractured and uneasy responses within BRICS.

The present era of sanctions and tariff regimes has rendered any reformist fiscal autonomy measures by BRICS to be perceived as revisionist attempts at de-dollarization. India's central bank proposal for digital currencies to ease cross-border BRICS payments has drawn hostility from Washington, with the current American President threatening hundred percent tariffs on any member state advancing an alternative currency architecture.

Whether BRICS members can reconcile growing defence posturing with its tradition of functional cooperation over non-traditional security issues remains the grouping's most pressing unresolved question. The recent Will for Peace 2026 naval drills in South African waters amplify antagonistic narratives towards US, combined with China's swift rise and Russia's protracted war in Ukraine. On the other hand, one questions whether BRICS can continue to sustain informal cooperation over non-traditional security issues as Stuenkel observed, covering trade, health, education, and technology. In that respect, it remains to be seen whether the fate of BRICS would become like that of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in the Indo-Pacific, bound together by functional cooperation over non-traditional security yet divergent in traditional military posturing.

The critique of Stuenkel's work is evident. From a theoretical perspective, there is an absence of deeper questions of how the 'liberal order' itself is constructed over time and space. The analysis might have benefited from explorations around constructivist creation of BRICS as a normative institution rooted in post-colonial and non-Western politics of the Global South. From a structural perspective, the book understates power asymmetries within BRICS, particularly in relation to China's arguable emergence as a revisionist power challenging unipolar American hegemony. The book considers responses of BRICS nations against Western hegemony, yet overlooks hedging strategies by smaller states of Asia, Africa, South America and Pacific Island States against the emerging powers of BRICS.

Nevertheless, Stuenkel's book succeeds as it refuses to be slotted into simplistic binaries, neither celebrating BRICS as a coherent counter-hegemonic front nor dismissing it as a passing fad. The book's core contribution remains faithful in providing an empirically rich narrative of a group of nations moving beyond mere recipients of the Western order towards active participants defining a multipolar new world order.