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# The Decline of the BRICS Is Proof of America's Resilience in a Multipolar World

Judah Grunstein Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2016

The most newsworthy thing about last weekend's BRICS summit, judging from the dearth of media coverage of the gathering in Goa, India, was its lack of newsworthiness. As recently as last year, the BRICS summit was accompanied by headlines of the challenge the grouping of major emerging economies poses to America's global position. As a coherent political bloc, the BRICS—made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—was always overblown. Now it seems it has already blown over.

To be fair, Sputnik International, the Kremlin-financed Russian propaganda outfit, made a valiant effort this year to highlight the forum's "expanding clout." (<https://sputniknews.com/world/201610181046459988-brics-summit-declaration-challenges>) But what little other news coverage there was of the Goa summit focused on the group's divisions, most notably India's failed efforts to mention Pakistani terrorist groups by name (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/China-bulldozed-Indias-security-concerns-as-Russia-looked-the-other-way/articleshow/54903013.cms>) in the passage of the final communiqué condemning state-sponsored terror, due to opposition from China.

The grouping's fall from grace is in part due to the political dynamics among the core three countries:



*Brazilian President Michel Temer, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chinese President Xi Jinping and South African President Jacob Zuma at the BRICS summit, Goa, India, Oct. 16, 2016 (AP photo by Manish Swarup).*

Russia, China and India. All three welcome cooperation to advance their broader goals. But there are natural limits to the partnerships, both bilateral and collective, that have always constrained the BRICS' potential to take on anything more than symbolic significance.

Russia needs Chinese investment, particularly since the West slapped sanctions on it over its annexation of Crimea and meddling in Ukraine. But it is wary of becoming overly dependent on what remains an asymmetric partnership in China's favor.

India hopes to maintain its longstanding defense ties with Russia, but not to the exclusion of developing new relationships with the U.S. and most recently France. And its troubled ties with China—due to an unresolved border dispute, economic and political rivalry in South Asia ([/trends.bloombergliaison.com/19831/as-china-expands-its-ties-in-south-asia-it-faces-a-familiar-rival-india](https://trends.bloombergliaison.com/19831/as-china-expands-its-ties-in-south-asia-it-faces-a-familiar-rival-india)), and most importantly China's support of Pakistan as highlighted by the imbroglio over the final communiqué—will represent a barrier to a more formal alignment for the foreseeable future.

For its part, China shares Russia's aspirations for a multipolar world, particularly one in which noninterference in the internal affairs of sovereign states takes precedence over human rights concerns and the responsibility to protect. And it welcomes the opportunity to be seen as a driving force behind an alternative to U.S.-led global institutions. But of the three, China has the least need for the other two to pursue its interests, particularly in the Asia-Pacific.

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As for Brazil and South Africa, both seemed like success stories during the salad days of the Rise of the Rest. More recently, events in Brazil seem to have cruelly confirmed the old adage that it is the country of the future—and always will be. South Africa's membership in the grouping was always more of a political maneuver, meant for consumption in the Global South, than a merit-based decision. Both countries now represent more ballast than lift for the rest of the BRICS.

More broadly, though, the BRICS' anti-climactic fizzle as a challenger to the United States speaks to the enduring resilience of America's global role and position, despite the relative decline of—and obvious limits to—U.S. influence and power in what has clearly become a multipolar world. And if the BRICS combined can't wield the kind of leverage necessary to realistically unseat Washington, their

chances alone are even less encouraging.

That's not to say they don't represent challenges. The conflict in Ukraine shows the ways Russia can skillfully manage gray-area conflicts to frustrate Washington, without triggering the kind of response that would play to America's relative strengths. Moscow's involvement in Syria seems as much designed to humiliate President Barack Obama as shore up Damascus. But while some observers have evoked a new Cold War, the current landscape more closely resembles old-fashioned geopolitical competition for spheres of interest. And here, Russia has greater difficulty in generating the kind of attraction that forms the basis of solid partnerships and alliances.

No sooner does the Russian deputy defense minister float the idea of re-establishing a permanent military base in Vietnam (</articles/20135/russian-military-considers-return-to-cuba-vietnam>) than Hanoi forcefully restates its refusal (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-russia-military-idUSKCN12D15S>) to consider foreign basing for any outside power. And while Russia might opportunistically court Washington's current crop of discontents, such as Turkey and Egypt, there are limits (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-ephemeral-middle-east-alliances-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2016-10>) to the kind of partnerships it will be able to form—not least because when push comes to shove, Russia cannot provide the financial and security backstop that the U.S. can.

China's rise poses a more serious and sustained challenge to America's global role, and particularly to U.S. primacy in Asia (</articles/19912/relearning-power-politics-to-avoid-a-war-between-the-u-s-and-china>). But Beijing's bullying behavior in Asia over the past several years has alarmed the very countries it most needs to reassure about its intentions. As a result, although the Obama administration's pivot to Asia may have underperformed, most countries in the region are happy to balance both powers against each other, and loathe to choose between them.

Meanwhile, more than a decade of checkbook diplomacy in high-risk investment environments like Venezuela and Angola (<https://www.ft.com/content/53ef2048-9103-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>) has chastened China's state-backed lenders (<https://www.ft.com/content/5bf4d6d8-9073-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>), with implications for Beijing's major source of international leverage and influence. Finally, demographics do not bode well. Socio-economically speaking, China is in a race against time to become rich before it becomes old: It still must lift out of poverty almost the equivalent of the entire combined population of the U.S. and Europe, before the weight of its retirees begins to overburden its key comparative advantage of a cheap labor force.

In this new environment, the U.S. visibly has a harder time imposing its will in local crises and international forums. But this is largely due to broad historical forces—China's rise, the upheaval in the Middle East, the global diffusion of economic wealth and political power—that have changed the

international landscape beyond the power of any leader or nation to withstand. Amid all the change, though, there is one constant: America, though no longer as powerful in absolute terms, remains the most influential country in the international system, and none of the BRICS countries, whether alone or in combination, are close to rivaling it.

In fact, the greatest threat to America's global standing is not the machinations of Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, or the chaos stalking the Middle East. Rather, it is the myopia of a portion of the American public that seems to think the country has entered a dark tailspin from which it requires saving. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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