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Hope for the Best, Prepare for the BRICS: The US-Led World Order and Its Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The degree to which multipolarity is relevant on the international stage is, among some, underappreciated. Since assuming global leadership at the end of World War II, the United States has often overextended and made decisions in pursuit of short-term gains without consideration of long-term risks. In the past decade, the consequences of those poor decisions have begun to come to fruition in the form of multipolarity.

To evaluate this phenomenon, one should look at the flagship institution representing it—the BRICS. The members of this bloc are among those dissatisfied with what the United States has to offer and are seeking to build alternative institutions and systems. Those who downplay the BRICS’s relevance seem to expect a challenge to the U.S.-led world order to develop as the latter did—with extreme speed and little opposition. However, this expectation is unreasonable. To demonstrate as much, this work will describe the history of the rise of the United States compared with the context in which the BRICS is emerging. It will then provide two examples of how U.S. foreign policy has, at times, undermined American influence and how the United States should seek to improve its foreign policy.

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Introduction

Even as many commentators, scholars, and policymakers acknowledge that America's unipolar moment has been over since at least the 2000s, few seem to appreciate the degree to which a multipolar world order is already emerging and the potential for future disruption to the status quo. Accordingly, the popular consensus is that the BRICS bloc,¹ the flagship indication of the new geopolitical era, is not to be taken seriously. This may prove to be an accurate perception, but American foreign policy leadership would be wise to consider that the BRICS may be a warning shot to the U.S.-led order and that, if the West does not address the grievances that drive nations to build alternative systems, the bloc's threat to American leadership and interests will increase.

The Beginning of a Global America

In 1902, then-President of Princeton University Woodrow Wilson wrote that the Battle of Manila in the Spanish-American War marked the moment America "...stepped forth into the open arena of the world."² While the acquisition of territories as far flung as the Philippines was no small feat, it did not qualify the United States as a mature, global leader. This title would be earned in the succeeding decades. The United States' journey to global preeminence began in World War I. Financially, the former colony became a net creditor to the United Kingdom.³

Militarily, the United States saved allies from, at best, a stalemate by providing critical money and materiel, raw manpower, and military might.⁴ Symbolically, not only was it the first time American troops fought to defend foreign soil in a war not of its own making,⁵ but it was the soil of the Old World in which the United States has its roots.

After the war, at Versailles, the UK saw French superiority over Germany as a potential point of destabilization, but the British could not maintain a balance of power between the continental neighbors alone. Thus, the UK, U.S., and France agreed to an Anglo-American security guarantee for the protection of France's eastern border. One should note that it was British Prime Minister David Lloyd George who suggested the inclusion of the Americans.⁶ The British gave the Americans a vote of confidence and trusted

in their ability to hold up their end of the agreement. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau accepted the terms of the guarantee, but it was never implemented, as the U.S. Senate refused to ratify both it and the Treaty of Versailles.

British concerns for stability on the continent were matched by the United States in financial terms, as the American government and businesses were interested in keeping trade and investment open in Europe. To achieve these ends, an effort led by an American banker Charles Dawes was launched to stabilize the mark and put Germany on more stable financial ground as they paid war reparations. While the effort was spearheaded by the Americans, the British contributed to the effort, resulting in the Dawes Plan of 1924.⁷ American involvement in this task, and even more so British invitation to it, is evidence of America's increasing influence abroad.

In World War I and its aftermath, the United States deployed a meaningful amount of military, industrial, financial, and professional assets to Europe for the first time in its history. American involvement was welcomed by its British and French allies and, after the war, directed towards the benefit of the entire continent. The First World War offered the United States the opportunity to show, both on its own volition and at the request of its allies, its ability to shape continental affairs. The Second World War, however, would catalyze an American presence both deeper and wider.

The Birth of an Order

After the guns fell silent in 1945, the United States emerged as the only major belligerent nation effectively untouched in terms of damage to the homeland and population loss. The slate of world power was as clean as it could be, and the United States was ready to write on it. The American economy doubled in size from 1939 to 1945 while Western Europe's contracted by 18 percent and Japan's was cut in half. America's economic health, military power, and sense of global responsibility led its leadership to place military bases across Europe and the world, which enabled the United States to become the West's standing army.⁸ Holding two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, the U.S. dollar became its most trusted currency. By the time the gold standard was removed, the United States no longer needed it

anyway, as the global economy already hinged on America and its financial market. The United States' exorbitant privilege meant its leadership did not have to make the same difficult decisions as those of other nations relating to debt, and the United States could leverage its currency's dominance in diplomatic disputes.⁹

More important than recognizing how much power the United States gained was how quickly it gained it. The Bretton Woods Conference, which the United States led to establish global financial norms and the institutions through which those norms would be executed, lasted less than a month in 1944.¹⁰ The United Nations was established, in its most generous understanding, over the span of a mere four years, measuring from the Declaration of St. James' Palace in June 1941 to the end of the San Francisco Conference in June 1945.¹¹ To defend international trade and solidify U.S. leadership of the West against the Soviet Union, America and its allies established NATO. Negotiations began in secret in March of 1948 and the treaty establishing NATO was signed just over one year later in 1949.¹²

This is how the main pillars of the present global order were created: with extreme speed, with few competitors, and without any incumbent institutions of a similar kind to dislodge. This could have only happened after a war that left the rest of the world incapable of filling a leadership vacuum. As the United States led the free world through the Cold War and its aftermath, its policymakers made decisions that caused other nations to question and seek an alternative to American primacy.

Self-Inflicted Wounds

The leaders and people of some nations are experiencing America-fatigue. Former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers was told by an official from a developing country, "I like your values better than I like China's, but... when we're engaged with the Chinese, we get an airport, and when we're engaged with you guys we get a lecture, and it's hard to not choose airports over lectures."¹³ This sentiment persists for many reasons, ranging from the petrodollar to interference in other nations' domestic politics. Examples worth evaluating include American involvement in the Middle East and American management of post-Cold War relations with Russia.

Kissinger's Chess Board

In the 1970s, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (who will be referred to by his first name to avoid confusion with his recently-deposed son Bashar) was attempting to organize and strengthen Arab states. At the same time, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger was forming U.S. foreign policy around the idea that history was not about ideology but the struggle for power, and that the world was an interconnected system in which power needed to be balanced. Kissinger brought that system to the Middle East when, in 1973 and 1974, he traveled to Syria and told President Hafez he would work towards a collaborative peace agreement that included the Palestinians, but then arranged for a separate deal to be signed between Egypt and Israel. Kissinger's execution of constructive ambiguity was successful in keeping Arab states from forming a coalition, but a British journalist who knew President Hafez said his optimism and hope for the future was gone; instead, he was a man who believed in nothing but revenge.¹⁴

In 1982, after a Lebanese militia massacred Palestinians in a refugee camp while Israeli forces looked on, President Ronald Reagan sent U.S. Marines into Lebanon to act as a neutral peacekeeping force. Now extremely suspicious of the Americans, President Hafez believed the U.S. troops were there not on an altruistic mission but to divide and geopolitically, perhaps even militarily, weaken the Arabs. He decided to push the Americans out and succeeded by taking inspiration from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran. In Iran's war with Iraq, Khomeini introduced suicide as a means of clearing minefields to the Islamic world, but President Hafez would take it farther, to suicide bombing for the purpose of killing others. In October 1983, two suicide bombers drove trucks into the U.S. Marine base in Beirut, killing 241 Americans.¹⁵

Kissinger must not have counted on such a violent reaction from President Hafez. While one cannot expect policymakers to see the future, the Secretary's approach may have been unnecessarily offensive, which increased the likelihood of some kind of negative response. From this and other examples, U.S. leadership should learn two things. First, in the short-term, one should broaden one's consideration of potential second-order effects to ensure that potential negative outcomes are sufficiently considered in the

decision-making process. Second, in the long-term, the memories of those we offend may outlast America's ability to be unfazed by what they do in response. An example of this second lesson can be seen in U.S.-Russian relations.

Confusion at the Kremlin

While many assumed the end of the Cold War would be an opportunity for the United States and Russia to build trust and reduce tensions, the parties' mismanagement of the episode derailed those efforts. In 1990, Secretary of State James Baker uttered the infamous statement that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would expand its membership "not one inch eastward" of Germany should it join NATO as a unified country. While interpretations of his and his colleagues' statements are debated today, one can conclude that the Soviets' understanding of them as commitments is at least reasonable.¹⁶ The succeeding Clinton Administration thus had to work in the context of the expectations set, intentionally or not, by Secretary Baker.

In 1993, U.S. officials led President Boris Yeltsin to believe that the Partnership for Peace (a program within NATO whose members do not benefit from Article 5 guarantees) would be the alternative to expanding full NATO membership. In a declassified account from October 22, 1993, Secretary of State Warren Christopher told President Yeltsin that the Partnership for Peace would include Russia in a unified Europe, who, upon hearing the plan exclaimed "This is genius!"¹⁷ At this point, not only was it understood by the Russians that the United States planned on expanding the Partnership for Peace, not NATO, but it was clear that Russian leadership was enthusiastic about this development. Secretary Christopher later wrote that President Yeltsin misunderstood, and that he was trying to explain that Partnership for Peace's expansion would precede NATO's. However, the American-written cable reporting the conversation validates Russian claims of being misled.¹⁸ Regardless, President Yeltsin would be surprised by developments the following year.

Throughout 1994, the two presidents communicated by letter, phone, and at a summit in Washington. The discussion of NATO was particularly important after Clinton gave a speech in Prague in January where he said the Partnership for Peace "changes the entire

NATO dialog so that now the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how,"¹⁹ upending Yeltsin's understanding from a few months prior.

President Clinton repeatedly assured his Russian counterpart that any NATO enlargement would be slow, communicated in advance, and in "partnership" with Russia.²⁰ In July, President Clinton himself told President Yeltsin he wanted to emphasize the Partnership for Peace program, which Russia had just joined a few weeks prior, instead of NATO. By December, the United States was aware of Russia's concerns and was told by Yeltsin that NATO expansion was "domineering" and an attempt to "split [the] continent again."²¹ In 1999, NATO expanded many inches eastward to include post-Soviet states. Clinton wanted to both expand NATO and build trust with Russia, but he did not understand how mutually exclusive those two goals were.

Just as in the case of Syria, American policymakers acted as if Russia's interests were of little consequence. The approach that won out drew criticism from William Burns, a political officer at the U.S. embassy in Moscow (who served as Director of the CIA in the Biden Administration), who wrote in 1995 that, "Hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the domestic political spectrum here." He reiterated the same warning in 2008 when he wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just [President Vladimir] Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players... I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests."²²

It was not just Burns but also former Ambassador George Kennan who, in an opinion piece in 1997, warned that NATO expansion would do more harm than good to the West.²³ In 2017, President Clinton's Secretary of Defense, William Perry, said, "In the last few years, most of the blame can be pointed at the actions that Putin has taken. But in the early years I have to say that the United States deserves much of the blame." He continued, "Our first action that really set us off in a bad direction was when NATO started to expand, bringing in eastern European nations, some of them bordering Russia."²⁴ It has since become clear that NATO expansion, especially into Ukraine, would

be viewed as threatening to Russia, but American leadership continued to ignore the warnings.

In the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, some American leaders like Senator John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland visited Kyiv in support of protesters. Viktor Yanukovich, the corrupt but legitimately elected president,^{25,26} represented a challenge to American interests owing to his softer disposition towards Russia.²⁷ American leadership, it seems, approached relations with post-Soviet Russia as if it was just as much of a threat as during the Cold War. This outdated, unnecessarily confrontational posture towards Russia did not end up advancing American or, debatably, Ukrainian interests. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine is immoral and illegal, but it is a strategic observation, not a moral one, to say that repeated dismissal of Russian concerns and interference on its border likely informed Putin's decision.

These two examples—one in the Middle East and one with Russia—briefly demonstrate the type of overconfidence, even if in pursuit of noble goals, that too often characterizes U.S. foreign policy when making risk assessments. America's post-war approach to the world may have gained it power and won it friends in the short-term, but it is not sustainable in the long-term. The attractiveness of American leadership and its perceived trustworthiness have declined. At home, an insufficient industrial base means the United States is no longer fit-for-purpose for primacy in a world where global supply chains rely heavily on nations with whom the West is competing. The establishment and rapid expansion of the BRICS is a direct result of these realities.

Comparing Coalitions

BRICS+ is overtaking the G7 on several measures. The former already has a higher GDP in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) and is expected to have a combined population four times larger in 2024 (it should be noted that this is, in part, due to the addition of new members). According to calculations by Simon Saradzhyan at the Harvard Belfer Center's publication *Russia Matters*, who used an index developed by Chin-Lung Chang of Taiwan's Fo-guang University, BRICS+ nations are well ahead of the G7 in critical mass (percent of world population and land area) and

economic strength (percent of global GDP). The G7 still holds a significant advantage in percent of world military expenditure, but that is a metric on which BRICS+ can improve quickly as China is doing now. The G7 also does not have a large enough advantage in military strength to make up for its gaps in the other two, meaning BRICS+ nations come out leading in the total index.²⁸

BRICS's and G-7's combined national power measured by Chin-Lung Chang's formula
(Input data is from 2023)

	2023		2023
BRICS critical mass	77.26	G-7 critical mass	24.92
BRICS economic strength	71.71	G-7 economic strength	58.44
BRICS military strength	47.56	G-7 military strength	96.55
BRICS's combined power per Ching-Lung Chan's formula	65.51	G-7's combined power per Ching-Lung Chan's formula	59.97

While the significance of these data in geopolitics can be debated, they at least show that BRICS+ nations pose a formidable challenge.

One geopolitically important sector not covered by the index is manufacturing. The manufacturing purchasing manager's index (PMI) is a monthly survey of supply chain managers across 19 industries. Numbers above 50 indicate an improvement in things like new orders, production, and employment, below 50 indicate a contraction, and 50 indicates no change from the previous month. The average PMI in BRICS+ countries (excluding Ethiopia and Egypt for which no data were found) as of December 2024 was 51.4, while the average PMI among G7 states was 47.0. Further, BRICS+ nations have maintained higher PMIs than G7 countries for at least a year and more in some cases.²⁹ In an age of friend-shoring and re-shoring, national and bloc-based manufacturing capacity has become more important than it has been in decades. Combined with their abundance of natural resources in areas like critical raw materials, BRICS+ nations seem better positioned in terms of manufacturing and secure supply chains.

Popular Assessments of the BRICS and Their Flaws

When assessing the BRICS and its development, it is critical to keep in mind the unique circumstances in which the U.S.-led world order was created. One must remember that BRICS is an underdog, attempting to

build global sway and parallel systems in the face of an established and yet-powerful system. Those who downplay the significance of BRICS often fail to do this.

A striking example of the bearish school of thought comes from Krzysztof Iwanek.³⁰ Writing in *The Diplomat*, he provides a rebuke of the idea that the BRICS is a threat to the post-war order. He argues BRICS is not the basis of a new multipolar world order due to a lack of trappings: no headquarters, no secretariat, and no official website. While one could reasonably expect an intergovernmental organization to have these things, they are simply outward appearances that matter little in the way of substance. In fact, the G7 itself lacks both a headquarters and centralized website (each summit has its own website).

Iwanek does make more significant observations, such as that the BRICS has never involved itself in a military conflict, solved a dispute, or saved a country from an economic crisis. While these are fair benchmarks to determine if a bloc holds global sway, it appears he is measuring BRICS by the standard of post-war institutions which are not apt for comparison. He expects BRICS to be doing too much, too quickly in the current environment.

Iwanek further claims that BRICS members lack a common denominator, as does Harry Broadman who argues its members' "profound economic, political, demographic, and geographic heterogeneity" and "exceptionally widely different set of cultural values" greatly limit their cooperation.³¹ While it is possible BRICS+ members could be doing more if these differences were less significant, the fact that such a wide variety of nations are willing to join BRICS+ is actually greater cause for alarm. It indicates that, despite the differences between its members, they are sufficiently displeased with Western-led institutions to try something new or, further, united in their desire to actively develop alternatives to the U.S.-led order.

It is increasingly clear that BRICS+ can pursue a coherent agenda and will be relevant on the global stage. The forum, for example, played a role in resolving border disputes between China and India,³² and the two nations' leaders held formal talks for the first time since 2020 at the October 2024 summit.³³ It speaks volumes that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was even willing to travel to Kazan, Russia

to attend the 2024 summit.³⁴ BRICS+ is relevant, coherent, and has a foundation on which it can build, but in what direction the bloc will go and why must be examined.

What Does BRICS+ Want?

BRICS+ nations, and the nations backing their initiatives, seek a world order that provides a menu of geopolitical and financial options from which states can choose. They have witnessed the shift in manufacturing and economic power towards themselves for the past several decades and believe greater political influence should follow.

Developing Development

The bloc's New Development Bank seeks to be an alternative to Western-led development banks, filling a market gap created by developing nations' dissatisfaction with groups like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They believe an institution "created by EMDCs [emerging markets and developing economies] for EMDCs"³⁵ will better secure positive outcomes. Their attempt may or may not be successful, but it is motivated by findings that poverty in IMF recipient nations increases by an average of 2.3 percent two years after implementation, and that political considerations from the Fund's largest donor countries often influence decisions.³⁶

Currency Options

Some BRICS+ nations also want to find an alternative to the U.S. dollar, either the currency of a BRICS+ member or even a common currency.³⁷ In the past, even after the end of the gold standard, it was practical and economically reasonable for the global reserve currency to be the U.S. dollar (USD); it was a time when America was producing a higher proportion of goods that people, corporations, and governments abroad wanted to buy, so it was useful to have U.S. dollars. Now, given the profound changes in the global economy, it is not as necessary to trade with the United States. This makes the creation of a new reserve currency, at least for part of the world, feasible. Not only has the incentive to use USD reduced, but American policy choices are pushing states away from the currency as well.

The U.S. government wields enormous power over the movement of money via the global financial messaging network Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) and ledgers at the Federal Reserve. If other countries begin to doubt the trustworthiness of the United States or are punished for political or military decisions with exclusion from the system, then the motivation to seize the aforementioned opportunity is strong.³⁸ American sway over the global financial system, when the U.S. government chooses to exercise it, is an example of weaponized interdependence, defined by Daniel Drezner as “a condition under which an actor can exploit its position in an embedded network to gain a bargaining advantage over others in a contained system.”³⁹

The United States must balance its ability to freeze assets and implement sanctions against its desire to prevent blocs like BRICS+ from creating their own alternatives, thus taking away a major lever of power from the United States. In short, the over-use of a tool could result in the loss of the tool. How to balance the use of that tool is not to be determined here, but the building momentum behind BRICS Pay could be an indicator that America’s ice is beginning to thin, at least in the opinion of Vladimir Putin and Brazilian President Lula da Silva.⁴⁰

Seats at Global Tables

The primary political reform some BRICS members advocate is permanent status on the UN Security Council for emerging powers. Before the bloc expanded, President Lula da Silva stated Brazil, South Africa, and India should be permanently at the table, which would mean all members at the time would have seats.⁴¹ This request is not without merit. In 1990, Brazil, India, and South Africa combined to make up 3.6 percent of global GDP. In 2023, they contributed 5.8 percent, a greater share than Germany, which is often proposed as a candidate for expansion in its own right.⁴² Other points in their favor include their possession of natural resources critical for digitization and the energy transition, manufacturing capacity, and their large populations.

Aging Gracefully

At present, the United States faces more multipolar pressure than ever before. Primacy of any one nation

cannot and will not last forever. Just as it takes less force to divert a river than it is to dam it, American foreign policy must be ready to adapt to new global circumstances. American policymakers should consider the rise of BRICS+ and the notable number of nations seeking to join it as constructive criticism of their approach to politics and economics. The definition of American national interests abroad should be more carefully tailored, the potential dangers of overly aggressive diplomacy should be weighed more heavily, and the default odds given to military intervention improving a situation should be lowered. These adjustments will assist American foreign policy decision-makers avoid the mistakes of the past.

Doing Things Differently

Central Asia—a geopolitical frontier defined by the nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—offers the United States a chance to use a different, more productive approach. It is a region that not only neighbors Russia but, if you were to ask the Kremlin, falls clearly in its sphere of influence; it also borders China, Iran, and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Central Asian nations (primarily and most importantly Kazakhstan, the state with the largest economy) are pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy.⁴³ In practice, this means maintaining friendships with Beijing, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington while rejecting the idea that they must pick a primary partner.⁴⁴ The approach is embodied in Kazakhstan’s plan to have a consortium build their first nuclear powerplant. The project features in discussions between Kazakh officials and those in China, France, Russia, and South Korea.⁴⁵

The United States and Europe should be grateful for the region’s multi-vector strategy. Central Asian nations have an abundance of natural resources, both traditional and of recent significance like critical minerals, as well as geostrategic advantages. While U.S. policy has historically erred on the side of primacy, militarism, and zero-sum competition, the United States would be wise to avoid treating the region’s states like pawns on a chessboard or exerting socio-political pressures.

America’s missteps in other geopolitically-contested countries can inform its approach to Central Asia. Obvious, hard power-related examples like fomenting regime change protests come to mind, but so do

more subtle ones. When speaking about America's development assistance in Central Asia, a female from the region who works in education commented that she found it odd that the United States had a special program to get Central Asian women in STEM when there is a need for more people in STEM on the whole.⁴⁶ This type of disconnect between American goals and both the needs and cultures of partner countries could be an example of "luxury beliefs," a term coined by psychologist and social commentator Robert Henderson. He explains "Luxury beliefs are ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes."⁴⁷ Conversations around luxury beliefs tend to occur in the context of domestic politics, but perhaps there is a place for the concept in international discussions. The United States must run its international programs and policy goals through rigorous testing to ensure that the Americans creating them are not intentionally or unintentionally attempting to impart their luxury beliefs on other nations. Without controlling for this, American efforts abroad are susceptible to being viewed as politically meddling or culturally corrosive.

A new framework, for Central Asia but also for America's interactions anywhere, could be guided by two simple questions: 1) Does this [project, deal, etc.] advance U.S. interests without harming the other country's interests? and 2) Are policymakers being honest with themselves and American counterparts? The measurement of success when acting abroad within the U.S. government and American-led institutions would no longer be married to ideologically-related outcomes, but instead to the results that make a difference in a nation's stability and success like reducing unemployment and poverty rates and increasing peace. Notions of mutual benefit and honesty in international politics might seem naïve, but they decomplicate relationships, make them more predictable, and more stable in the long run.

Endnotes

- 1 In this work, “BRICS” will refer to only the nations the acronym stands for (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). When referring to the bloc in its current, expanded form, the term “BRICS+” will be used. When referring to the bloc as a phenomenon regardless of its composition, it will be referred to as “the BRICS.”
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