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REGIONS, REGIONALIZATION AND BRICS

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abstract

BRICS AS A REGION IS DIFFICULT TO ANALYZE AND JUSTIFY THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF REGIONS, WHICH PUT A PREMIUM ON GEOGRAPHICAL CONTIGUITY, HOMOGENEITY AND PLACE THE 'REGION' ON A SCALE BELOW THE STATE. THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY APPROACH WITH ITS LEANINGS TOWARDS THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF SPACES AND PLACES AND THE MANDATE TO ANALYZE THE SPATIALITY OF SOCIAL RELATIONS, DOES PROVIDE FOR SUCH REGIONAL FORMATIONS. AS REGIONS ARE DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS, POWER RELATIONS ARE EMBEDDED IN THEM, WHICH FAVOR CERTAIN FORMATIONS OVER OTHERS. RECENT LITERATURE IN GEOGRAPHY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES DOES SUBSTANTIATE THAT REGIONS ARE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS.¹ THE REGIONALIZATION PROCESSES UNRAVEL WITH GEOPOLITICAL

¹ Albert, Reuber 2007; Neumann 2010; Sidaway 2012.

IMAGINATIONS OF THE CONSTITUENT STATES AND THERE ARE CERTAIN COMMON MOTIVES WHICH TEND TO BRING COHESION AMONG THEM. THE PAPER INTERPRETS THE CONCEPT OF REGION IN GEOGRAPHY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ATTEMPTS TO LOCATE BRICS IN THESE CONCEPTIONS. THE PAPER ALSO REFLECTS ON WHETHER BRICS AS A GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE THEORETICAL CONCEPTION OF REGION. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS THEN ASKED ARE: IS BRICS A REGION IN THE TRADITIONAL SENSE OF THE TERM? IS BRICS A UNIQUE GROUPING WHICH NEGATES THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF REGION? IS IT POSSIBLE TO EMPLOY CONCEPTS IN CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS TO UNDERSTAND THE BRICS AS A REGION? THEREFORE, THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER IS TO EXAMINE WHETHER THE BRICS CAN BE EXPLAINED THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE REGION OR THEY ARE INSUFFICIENT TO EXPLAIN THE SAME. IN THE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE LITERATURE ON BRICS THERE HAS BEEN HARDLY ANY EFFORT TO INVESTIGATE IT AS A REGION. THE PAPER SEEKS TO ADDRESS THIS GAP IN LITERATURE.

BRICS, GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION, REGIONS

keywords

INTRODUCTION

THE GROUPING, BRICS, COMPRISING THE STATES OF BRAZIL, RUSSIA, INDIA, CHINA AND SOUTH AFRICA HAS RECENTLY GARNERED IMMENSE ATTENTION BECAUSE OF ITS UNIQUE NATURE. THE UNIQUE FEATURE OF THE BRICS IS THAT THE CONSTITUENT STATES ARE SITUATED AT DISPARATE LOCATIONS WHICH BELIE

THE TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF REGIONS AND REGION FORMATION. HOWEVER, EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR GROUPS CAN BE FOUND IN CERTAIN GROUPS CAUSED BY THEIR COLONIAL PAST LIKE THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND THE ORGANIZATION OF FRANCOPHONE STATES. IF THE BINDING FEATURE FOR THESE COUNTRIES WHICH HAD EXPERIENCED SIMILAR COLONIAL LEGACIES WERE CULTURAL CONNECTIONS SUCH AS COMMON COLONIAL HISTORY, THE BONDING WITNESSED IN THE BRICS IS DIFFICULT TO ARRIVE AT. THE PAPER INTERPRETS THE CONCEPT OF REGION IN GEOGRAPHY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ATTEMPTS TO LOCATE BRICS IN THESE CONCEPTIONS. THE PAPER ALSO REFLECTS ON WHETHER BRICS AS A GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE THEORETICAL CONCEPTION OF REGION.

The research questions then asked are: is BRICS a region in the traditional sense of the term? Is BRICS a unique grouping which negates the traditional conceptions of region? Is it possible to employ concepts in critical geography and critical geopolitics the BRICS as region? Therefore, the objective of the paper is to examine whether the BRICS can be explained through the traditional conceptions of the region or they are insufficient to explain the same. The currently available literature on the BRICS, there has been hardly any effort to investigate it as a region. The paper seeks to address this gap in literature.

The paper is divided into four sections: the first two examine the theoretical/conceptual literature on regions in general and in the international system while the last two sections visualize the BRICS among these theoretical/conceptual strands.

REGIONS IN GEOGRAPHY

The etymology of the term 'region' in English stretches back to 14th century when it evolved from the Latin word

regio meaning direction, boundary, or district, linked to *regere*, meaning to direct or rule.² Geography, as a discipline has witnessed a sustained focus on the study of regions but a recurring and constant theme is that regions exhibit homogeneity in terms of various characteristics, and that defines them as regions. Regions in geography are also marked by a peculiar distinction of 'formal' and 'functional' regions. Formal or uniform regions are areas defined by one or more of the features that occur within them³ and presuppose a degree of homogeneity.⁴ The functional region is a geographically delimited spatial system defined by the linkages binding particular phenomena in that area and does not assume any degree of spatial homogeneity.⁵ Which phenomena? That depends on what kind of system we are interesting in.⁶ Relevant examples of functional regions are economic, cultural, political, ecological, etc.⁷

A major defining feature of the study of regions in traditional geography has been to study the uniqueness and character of a region with all the internal causal connections which make it special and differentiate it from others. Therefore, the discipline acquired a descriptive character. Harvey's work here is instructive wherein he succinctly summarizes it while looking at the conceptions of regions for the field of geography, "The 'region' is possibly the most entrenched of all geographical concepts. Within the discipline it has proven the least flexible, mainly because of its central role in those essentialist definitions of the subject which rest exclusively on the study of chorology or regional differentiation."⁸ In general, the region is defined in terms of its homogenous qualities or geographical contiguity and sometimes in terms of its coherent relations between diverse elements.

On the other hand, such simplistic approaches to understand the concept have been discarded in critical geography. The 'region' typically conjures up the idea of a homogenous block of space that has a persisting distinctiveness due to its physical and cultural characteristics. The claim is that it exists 'out there' in the world, even if there is a prior requirement to think that the world is divided up in this way.⁹ Such *a priori* assumptions about the region have been questioned in critical geography.

2 Tomaney 2009: 136.

3 Tomaney 2009: 140.

4 Herod 2011: 127.

5 Herod 2011: 127.

6 Tomaney 2009: 140.

7 Vayrynen 2003: 26.

8 Harvey 2005: 245.

9 Agnew, 1999: 92.

This combination of a claim to real existence and the necessity for prior thought so as to define a region has caused untold problems for those trying to have their regionalization schemes accepted as more ‘real’ than others.¹⁰ It also leads to the unfortunate opposition in contemporary geography between those who claim the mantle ‘real’ for their regions and those who regard all regions as mere inventions of an observer whose definitions say more about the political-social position of that observer than the phenomena the regions purport to classify.¹¹ A long-standing and established feature of the regions is that they unite through the shared and common features. However, this is increasingly put under strain with the reading that regions may divide as well. Agnew cites “one author in a brilliantly evocative text, questions whether we might not be better focusing on regional entities that bring together as well as divide.”¹²



REGIONS HAVE BEEN MORE RECENTLY UNDERSTOOD AS FLUID AND HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE REALM OF CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY

In geography where region forms one of the key concepts of the field, an important theoretical realization since the last three decades has been to understand regions not as *a priori* entities to be studied but to understand them as social constructs enmeshed in the societal and power relations in the system. A New Regional Geography (NRG) is the outcome which claims “that places and regions could be theorized as a combination, and contingent outcome, of the interaction of localized social relations and material conditions with wider processes of capitalist restructuring.”¹³ Perhaps an element of the Marxist understandings of emancipation is visible in the NRG. When examined through the lens of the realist method, the NRG envisioned places and regions as neither fixed territories nor a contingent ‘coming together’ of global flows and networks (which would imply that places and regions had little or no independent causal influence). Rather regions were to be examined as semi-coherent territories within which place-specific causal properties could shape – and in turn were shaped by – the wider dynamics of capital accumulation, state intervention (or withdrawal) and uneven development.¹⁴

10 Agnew 1999: 92.

11 Agnew 1999: 92.

12 Quote from Ascherson (1995) (Agnew 1999: 94).

13 Quote from Massey (Jonas 2012: 265).

14 Jonas 2012: 265.

The dominant strand in geography about the understandings of space and place is the relational approach. The relational approach to regions does lay stress on the binding effect of the regional entities. One theme which is central to relational thinking is the idea that the region represents a contingent ‘coming togetherness’ or assemblage of proximate and distant social, economic and political relationships, the scale and scope of which do not necessarily converge neatly around territories and jurisdictions formally administered or governed by the nation state.¹⁵ Jonas further argues that proponents of the relational approach therefore distance themselves from bounded, static and ahistorical representations of space and place.¹⁶ Regions have been more recently understood as fluid and historically contingent social constructions in the realm of critical geography.

Paasi explains that “the new regional geographers have been interested in the power relations, practices, and discourses through which people, social communities, and classes produce and reproduce ‘regions’ and localities in their daily life through various institutionalized practices, such as politics, administration, economy, education, media, communication, and so on. This complexity shows that new regional geographers often adopt an emancipatory interest.¹⁷ Though the paper’s emphasis is not on the emancipatory interests, it does point out that regions are beset with social production.

In consonance with the recent approaches on space and place in geography, it is possible to surmise that the acceptance of relational approaches to the study of regions is widespread in academia. However, the applicability of the concept of region in geography to the study of regions in the international system is still in its early stages barring a few notable exceptions.¹⁸ The next section looks at some of this work in geography on supra-national regions with particular focus on the old and new regionalisms or at the scale above the state.

15 Jonas 2012: 263.

16 Jonas 2012: 263.

17 Paasi 2009a: 221.

18 Agnew 1999; Paasi, 2009; Paasi 2009a; Jonas 2012; Sidaway 2012.

REGION' IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The significance of territory and bounded spaces in the international system cannot be underrated, even in the present age of global flows, as the territorially bounded state is the primary actor and the regionalization process further involves the bounded states in their fold and the regional structures acquire a territorial character. Paasi highlights the issue with reference to regions and territories:

“It is obvious that in spite of accelerating globalisation, the rise of networks, flows of immigrants and refugees, internet, the borderless world thesis, and the poststructuralist or post-nationalist literature that have challenged the national state, the contemporary world is still a complex constellation of more or less bounded spaces that exist at various spatial scales. These spaces are ‘regions’ or ‘territories’. All territories are regions but not all regions are territories. By definition a territory differs from a region in that its boundaries and the resources therein are under the control of people. Such control is an expression of territoriality. Territoriality is not a constant but a political, spatiallyselective strategy that can be exercised or not”¹⁹

Thus the bounded-ness of territory still plays a significant role in spatial conceptualizations at various scales. Tremendous amount of focus has been accorded to the system of states and its territorial nature whereas regions are as territorial in nature as states are, but not sufficient attention has been given to the territoriality of regions. Nonetheless, it is a group of states which imagine themselves together for geopolitical, economic and cultural reasons. Paasi’s clarification on the nature and constitution of old regionalism is instructive here as he takes the debate back to the 1930s with references to the protectionism during that period and attributes cultural and social qualities to it along with economic nature of regionalism. Originally regionalism was important in cultural fields like art, literature and architecture and was thus related to regional identity and consciousness, and cultural performance.²⁰ In this explanation, the region with its geographical explanation also carries the connotations of culture and art in general.

The Second World War is a water-shed in regional studies as it is marked in geopolitics by the process of decolonization which followed soon after the war. The empirical evidence and impetus was “from the

19 Paasi 2009: 124.

20 Paasi 2009: 127.

first wave of development of the European Economic Community and de-colonization processes which saw the creation of (albeit now defunct) bodies such as the East African Common Market.”²¹ The Cold War with its bipolar structure played a significant role in shaping the regional integration during the period after the Second World War, wherein integration too had a significant imprint of the geopolitics of the superpowers. During the Cold War, bipolarity and nuclear weapons created contextual effects that contributed to the emergence of a semi-global system. In Europe, in particular, extended US nuclear deterrence and Soviet political-military control of its eastern half limited the autonomy of individual states and made them parts of a larger whole.²² The expression ‘old’ or ‘first’ regionalism refers to the first post-World War II initiatives of integration that took place in Western Europe – hence it does not refer to the *traditional* cultural and literary regionalism.²³ This adds another layer of distinction to the study of regions with the addition being the traditional or cultural regions in the international system.

On the other hand, new regionalism is identified with the geopolitical re-arrangement of the global space after the end of the Cold War. One of the most salient features of the international order that has gradually replaced the sharp Cold War divide has been the rise of ‘new regionalism’. A boom of regionalisms and regionalist projects have occurred worldwide since the late 1980s, the EU only being the most significant example.²⁴ While old regionalism emerged along with the rise of European integration, new regionalism has gained currency in the context of globalizing region system.²⁵ A clear link between the new forms of regionalization and the spread of the neo-liberal global capitalism is visible through the work of Anssi Paasi and John Agnew.

In the context of new regionalism, Breslin and Higgott²⁶ make the distinction between regionalism and the process of regionalization. In this discourse, then, regionalism connotes those state-led projects of cooperation that emerge as a result of intergovernmental dialogues and treaties.²⁷ Regionalization refers to those processes of integration which, albeit “(...) seldom unaffected by state policies,” derive their driving force “from markets, from private trade and investment flows, and from the

21 Breslin, Higgott 2000: 334.

22 Vayrynen 2003: 28.

23 Paasi 2009: 127.

24 Paasi 2009: 126.

25 Paasi 2009: 127.

26 Breslin, Higgott 2003.

27 Breslin, Higgott 2003: 344.

policies and decisions of companies.”²⁸ The regionalization processes are driven more by the economic motives and the market, rather than being purely state driven.

Regions increasingly have formed an important part of the larger process of globalization, whether in opposition to the forces of globalism or in correspondence with the same. Breslin and Higgott²⁹ while emphasizing the link follow three caveats:

- a) relates to the fact that, when studying regionalization especially, the notion of the boundary or perimeter of a region can, by default or design, be fuzzy. It can often be the case that there is no treaty that stipulates which states are in and which are out.
- b) concerns the way in which we map economic space and political space. Care should be taken to avoid strict national, or sovereign, parameters in identifying regionalization. In addition to looking for a correlation between the national state and regional membership we should also examine which groups or classes of actors are involved in processes of integration. The creation of transnational class alliances that integrate elites, but usually not the wider populations of a given country, is the key here.
- c) relates to the acceptance of false dichotomy regarding the role of states in the regionalization processes. The focus of a lot academic research is that organization of production is largely based within and among firms with tremendous flexibility and states play a minimal or only the observer’s role. Fortunately, most analysts do now recognize that, even where non-state actors play the leading role in promoting micro-regional integration, state actions and decisions continue to play important roles.³⁰

A cache of similar ideas are emphasized in the work of Agnew³¹ wherein the focus is the gradual transformation of the world economy and the resultant spatial changes occurring at the global level. “These debates are all very well but they do not engage with the changing character of the world economy and how it is redrawing the regional map of the world. From one point of view this involves the re-emergence of a mosaic of mesoscale

28 Breslin, Higgott 2003: 344.

29 Breslin, Higgott 2003.

30 Breslin, Higgott 2003: 346.

31 Agnew 1999.

regional economies, organized largely with respect to metropolitan areas, bypassed since the nineteenth century by a global system of national economies.”³² The networks of the intense interconnections of the urban areas around the world have acquired increased salience.



REGIONS INCREASINGLY HAVE FORMED AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE LARGER PROCESS OF GLOBALIZATION

Concluding this interesting piece on regions and regionalization in the world system, Agnew reminds us of the *territorial trap* which works across and is embedded into the regionalization processes operating at the international system. The old meta-geographies rely largely on inserting national units into compact regions. But what if the emerging shape of the world economy is one in which widely dispersed centers connect together in networks of flows and power that resist ready categorization into neat world-regional units?³³ This hinges on the realization that the world economy acquires a new spatiality not only by the regionalizations, which happen on the basis of the networks of the state but also due to many other new forms of economic and social interactions which happen due to the increasingly global character of the economy.

Regional schemes are never simply intellectual. Neither are they simply political. They play with facts about the world at the same time they must reflect the biases, intellectual and political, of their originators.³⁴ But at long last the ways world-regional schemes have been invented and imposed are attracting much needed attention. What remains is to sort out more satisfactorily the philosophical basis to our exploration of such schemes.³⁵ Critical geopolitics with its ontological emphasis on spatial construction of dangers provides for analysis for such regionalization. The following section looks at the new economic group, BRICS, and whether the concepts and processes discussed in the previous sections are relevant to understand the group.

32 Agnew 1999: 94.

33 Agnew 1999: 95.

34 Agnew 1999: 95.

35 Agnew 1999: 95.

BRICS AND REGIONALIZATION

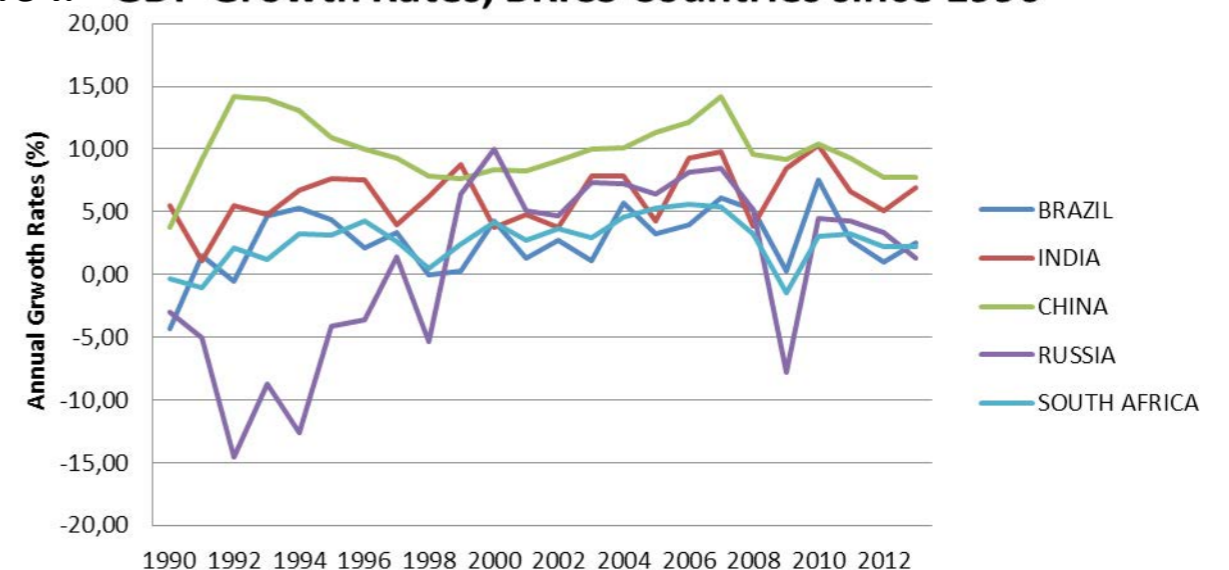
“The strengthening of regional imaginations and levels of political authority beyond the nation-state also demonstrates the way in which the spatial organisation of politics – in the sense of spatial constructions, representations and imagined communities – is not only an inherent element of ongoing political change, it rather also seems to be one of its most challenging structuring principles. It might thus be crucial to analyse and deconstruct the spatial logics underlying emerging forms of global governance and, in this context, new forms of regions and regional integration. Particularly the acknowledgment of the important and possibly even constitutive role which regions play in the emerging structures of global governance, or indeed a ‘global polity’, thus directly also leads to a rejection of simplifying neoliberal ‘globalist’ images and narratives of a global equality emerging as a result of globalisation, and rather highlights the fact that political, social, and economic disparities can be expected to be more and more represented on a regional rather than on a national level.”³⁶

Following Albert and Reuber’s ideas on the recent spate of regionalizations at the international level, three criteria for spatial organization of politics can be identified: spatial constructions, representations and imagined communities. Applying these three themes to the BRICS, it can be surmised that the group is a spatial construction and a result of the spatialized social relations, manifested in the ever-increasing economic activity occurring due to the current phase/process of neo-liberal global capitalism. The spatiality of these social relations is a consequence of the meta-labels, which have been established by repeated usage of the terms like the emerging economies, rising powers and anchor countries. Such terms, as James Sidaway³⁷ argues, allow for particular imaginations on the basis of the similar levels of development and the global academic and social language referring to these states tends to club them together as members of the labels mentioned above. He explains: “But a huge variety of other regional communities of states have been established in recent years, widely held to be inherent features of the *Weltgeist*. They are thereby often described as responses to putative ‘globalisation’ or as a feature of the post-Cold War world.”³⁸

36 Albert, Reuber 2007: 551.
 37 Sidaway 2002.
 38 Sidaway 2003: 5.

An important aspect of the conception of the regions is that they are considered to be having similar features or are homogenous to be identified as a region. In looking for similarities among the BRICS countries, two important aspects can be highlighted, 1) BRICS states are regional powers in their respective regions and 2) BRICS states individually are products of the recent phase of globalization and its allied processes. The second aspect refers to the benefits and prosperity which the BRICS states have accrued due to the liberalization of their economies – especially China, India and Brazil – and therefore, perhaps, have similar notions of the globalization and related processes. A careful look at the Gross Domestic Production growth rates of the BRICS states since 1990 (except China which started the liberalization of the economy in the 1980s) reveals the extent of growth these states have achieved. Figure 1 illustrates the economic growth achieved by the BRICS states during this period. The recent phase of globalization and liberalization is roughly co-terminus with the end of the Cold War.

Figure 1. GDP Growth Rates, BRICS Countries since 1990



Source: Worldbank.org 2015.

Recent attempts to conceptualize region have stressed the value of establishing its connections with space and place.³⁹ Thus, the constituent states of the BRICS are able to visualize themselves together in spatial terms due to the overarching phenomenon of globalization. More evidence for

39 Meena 2013: 586.

the regionalization processes operating at the BRICS level can be identified in the economic sphere. Table 1 illustrates the extent of growing trade among the BRICS nations for the last two fiscal years that is 2011-2012 and 2012-2013.

**Table 1. Intra-BRICS Trade for 2012 and 2013
(in billion US\$)**

	2012					2013				
EXPORTER	Brazil	China	Russia	India	South Africa	Brazil	China	Russia	India	South Africa
Brazil		41.2	3.1	5.6	1.8		46.3	2.85	3.13	1.84
China	33.4		44.1	47.7	15.3	36.20		49.60	52.24	16.83
Russia	2.3	35.8		7.6	0.3	1.98	35.63		4.23	0.29
India	6.2	14.7	2.1		5.0	6.12	16.42	2.42		5.74
South Africa	0.8	10.1	0.4	3.7		0.66	12.06	0.40	8.88	
<i>Subtotal</i>	42.7	101.8	49.7	64.6	22.4	44.96	110.41	55.27	68.48	24.7
TOTAL	281.2					303.2				

Source: **2012** data based on Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Relations (Trade Intelligence Division).
2013: Author’s compilation from official websites of BRICS countries.

A cursory look at spatial representations at the global level from a regional perspective reveals that the linkages from the literature on regions in geography can be useful. For instance Allen et al.⁴⁰ lay down two principles to define/conceptualize a region; first, it embodies a strongly relational approach to thinking about space and place. That is, it understands both space and place as constituted out of spatialized social relations – and narratives about them – which not only lay down ever-new regional geographies, but also work to reshape social and cultural identities and how they are represented. Second, it acknowledges that such studies are always done for a purpose, with a specific aim in view. Whether theoretical, political, cultural or whatever, there is always a specific focus.⁴¹ Both the aforementioned principles of conceptualizing space are applicable

40 Allen et al. 2002: 2.
41 Allen et al. 2002: 2.

to the BRICS as a group. For the BRICS countries, the relevant socio-spatial categories prior to the recent phase of globalization were the ‘Third World,’ developing economies and the global South or that is how they were represented.

The notion of relational space is present in the vague generalizations which stress meta-geographical divisions of the planet. The initial narrative was that they were striving for the levels of development already achieved by the west and following similar linear models of growth and development. But in many instances these categories were the ‘other’ of the global North, the West and the First World. Hence, they were relational categories.⁴² The current narrative about the BRICS’ economies reflects the concerns of globalization and calls them ‘rising,’ ‘emerging’ or ‘anchor countries’ and denotes a new spatiality. Sidaway⁴³ argues in the same article that such categories are not innocent and have many motives behind them. In the case of the BRICS, the motives are clear from the fact that the term BRIC was conceptualized by a business consultancy firm. The BRICS were an analytical concept, a futuristic projection, an investment strategy and a slick acronym well before they became a group of states.⁴⁴ The genesis of the BRICS can be found in the attempt of Goldman Sachs, the US multinational investment banking firm, to predict the future path of global capitalism.⁴⁵ Thus, there is a purpose behind such regionalization schemes. Furthermore, as Neumann argues, taking cue from analysis through discursive formation of the region, that “practices and discourses construct regions through institutionalized processes and reflect asymmetrical power relations.”⁴⁶

GEOGRAPHICAL/GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATIONS AND THE BRICS

Harvey explains the presence of geographical imagination as pervasive in human life and asserts that:

42 Sidaway 2012: 49-50.
43 Sidaway 2012.
44 Sahni 2013: 571.
45 Sahni 2013: 572.
46 Neumann 2010: 369.

“This “spatial consciousness” or “geographical imagination” was manifest in many disciplines. Architects, artists, designers, city planners, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, ecologists and economists as well as geographers and philosophers have all appealed to it (...)”⁴⁷

Further, he calls for a combination of the geographical imagination with a sociological imagination to understand reality better. “The relations between social processes and spatial forms needed to be better understood as a prerequisite to well-grounded critical research on urbanization, modernization, diffusion, migration, international capital flows, regional development, uneven geographical development, geopolitics, and a host of other subjects of considerable importance.”⁴⁸

Though Harvey’s imaginations refer to the individual, such geographical imaginations can be constructed at the level of nations, as evident from the work of Benedict Anderson titled *Imagined Communities* (1983). Furthermore, it is possible to imagine such communities at the international level as a globalized world and an intense flow of information, commodities, ideas and people facilitates such imagination. “Something in Anderson’s thesis might be applied to thinking about certain international communities, such as the (re)invention of Europe in the form of the European Union.”⁴⁹ This has not escaped other observers. Expressing it simply, Andrew Hurrell says that: “As with nations, so regions can be seen as imagined communities which rest on mental maps whose lines highlight some features whilst ignoring others.”⁵⁰ The BRICS are also one such geographical imagination where the constituent states have been able to identify/ recognize the relationship among them and they have been able to forge a group based on certain common characteristics and features. As pointed out earlier, owing to their recent economic growth these states together have been referred to as the ‘emerging economies,’ ‘anchor countries,’ etc.

Another very significant and common feature which provides a bonding for the constituent states of the BRICS is that they are regional powers in their respective states *viz.* India is a regional power in South Asia, China in East Asia and larger Asia, Brazil in South America, Russia

47 Harvey 2005: 212.

48 Harvey 2005: 212.

49 Sidaway 2003:11.

50 Quote from Hurrell (1995) (Sidaway 2003:11).

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IN THE CASE OF THE BRICS, THE DOMINANT SOCIAL ACTIVITY IS THE RECENT PHASE OF GLOBALIZATION

still enjoys considerable clout in Eastern Europe and South Africa is undoubtedly is a regional power in Southern Africa. Owing to such common traits there is a sense among them that they are undergoing similar levels of development and growth, which in turn leads them to negotiate the environmental issues together whether through the G-77, BASIC or the IBSA,⁵¹ at various UN forums including the WTO, UNEP, COPs and the CBDs.⁵² However, Russia is excluded in such discussions because of the high level of development it has acquired compared to the other BRICS countries. Recognition of these commonalities, in turn, creates the common ground for the members to forge a group and helps to distinguish it from similar entities, in this case, the West. Such arguments can at least be substantiated theoretically, “each form of social activity defines its own space.”⁵³ Thus, in the case of the BRICS, the dominant social activity is the recent phase of globalization. BRICS are still a very unique group for the peculiar qualities mentioned above and the fact that these are countries with very disparate locations around the world.

Harvey further presses the issue about globalization’s impact upon various imaginations of space, “Globalization (however it is construed) has forced all sorts of adjustments into how the sociological imagination (if such a coherent concept is still viable) can now work. It cannot, for example, afford to ignore the basics of political-economy nor can it proceed as if issues of national and local differences, space relations, geography and

51 BASIC: Brazil, South Africa, India and China – a group of 4 newly industrialized countries formed in 20-11-2009 by agreement to increase their leverage at various international forums. (Editor’s Note – JvdB)

52 United Nations Environmental Programme; Conference of the Parties within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). (Editor’s Note – JvdB)

53 Harvey 2005: 214.

environment are of no consequence.”⁵⁴ Thus globalization has shaped the spatiality owing to its pervasive nature and such spatiality is also reflected in the way the BRICS have been formulated as a geopolitical group. Such arguments have resonance with the ‘geopolitical imagination’ explained by John Agnew while explicating theories of traditional geopolitics.



BRICS COULD BE A GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION
WHICH HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE PRACTICED
AS A GLOBAL GEOSTRATEGIC DESIGN

Critiquing the geopolitical theorizing by the likes of Halford Mackinder, Mahan, Haushofer and Spykman, Agnew labels such attempts as geopolitical imagination and visualization and suggests they are a defining feature of modernity which is exemplified by two elements: 1) that the world is seen as a picture, as an ordered structured whole, separated from the self who is viewing from the world, and 2) the world pictured beyond the horizon is a source of chaos and danger.⁵⁵ If the geographical spread of the BRICS constituent countries is an indication, the BRICS are a geopolitical construct in the traditional geopolitical mold. A careful inquiry of the BRICS summit declarations attests to this notion, as the statements at the end of each of the six BRICS summits held so far have displayed a gradual evolution toward inclusion of security as a vital concern of the BRICS. The First Summit at Yekaterinburg in 2009 listed as its main concerns the global financial crisis, global environmental problems, reform of global financial institutions, energy security, terrorism and protection of human rights.⁵⁶ Fast forward to the Fifth BRICS Summit in Durban⁵⁷ and the eThekweni declaration⁵⁸ declarations have strong and clear geopolitical undertones. Beginning with a call for global peace and security in statement 1 to statements 21, 22, 24, and statements 26 to 33, the intention is to address issues ranging from the UN’s role in ensuring international peace and security, the role of the UN peacekeeping forces in Africa, the security situation in Syria, Palestine, the Iranian nuclear issue, Afghanistan, Mali, DRC, to international terrorism.⁵⁹ The sixth BRICS summit to be held in Fortaleza, Brazil in 2014 was more explicit in making the geopolitical nature of the group more clear.

The geographical location of the BRICS countries makes it safe to

54 Harvey 2005: 215.

55 Agnew 1998.

56 President of Russia.

57 BRICS 2013b.

58 BRICS 2013a.

59 BRICS 2013a.

assume that BRICS have a global reach. It also comfortably dovetails with the traditional geopolitical theories of ‘heartland’⁶⁰ and ‘rimland.’⁶¹ A brief exposition will clarify and make evident the suspicion that BRICS could be a geopolitical imagination which has the potential to be practiced as a global geostrategic design. The concepts of heartland and rimland, it is alleged, formed a geostrategic background for the containment policy of the United States during the Cold War.⁶² BRICS constituent countries span four continents. Russia is present in both Europe and Asia and increasingly there is a movement that supports the idea of Eurasianism/Neo-Eurasianism after the leading geopolitical thinker Alexander Dugin⁶³ The heartland is purely Eurasian in its geographical expanse.⁶⁴ China comprises the rimland, the concept entailing the coastal states of the larger Eurasian continental landmass spanning from the Western European coast to the Kamchatka Peninsula in North eastern Russia.⁶⁵ The third Asian component of the BRICS is India, which also forms a part of the rimland. This troika of Russia, China and India geographically dominate the largest continental landmass on earth, due to their respective size ranking 1st, 4th and 7th in terms of their areal expanse in square kilometers⁶⁶ Russian military capabilities are still formidable after the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas India and China are recorded in 2012 as the biggest buyers of defense and military equipment with India accounting for 12% of the global imports in arms and China procuring 6% of the global imports⁶⁷ adding to their already established military capabilities.

South Africa utilizes its pre-eminent status on the African continent to mediate and facilitate the investment for resource extraction and development. This was evident in the 5th BRICS Summit in March 2013, when many African governments were invited to interact with the representatives of the BRICS countries. South Africa projects itself as a gateway to Africa. The summit itself was christened as “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialization” to attract investments in the fields of development and industrialization in Africa and subsequently many schemes for investment in Africa were announced during the summit.⁶⁸ South Africa tops the list of arms buyers on the

60 Mackinder 1943.

61 Spykman 1942.

62 Gerace 1991: 347.

63 Shekhovtsov 2009: 697.

64 Mackinder 1943: 597.

65 Spykman 1942.

66 CIA 2014.

67 Sinha 2013.

68 BRICS 2013a.

African continent and exerts considerable influence in the affairs of the continent as does Brazil. These two states are in no sense marginal to global geopolitics and have played an important role in debates surrounding the status of the global environment and have been influential in multilateral diplomacy on these issues.

Brazil and South Africa, the southern hemisphere components of BRICS, form parts of the Outer or Marginal Crescent in the geopolitical schema of Mackinder, whereas they form parts of the “Three Islands” in the terminology of Spykman.⁶⁹ In both the geopolitical schemes these two BRICS countries are accorded a marginal status. Brazil ranks fifth in terms of the areal expanse of a state and South Africa ranks 25th in terms of its area in square kilometers. An important feature of both these states is that they also dominate their respective continents in terms of their military capabilities and influence and could safely be considered as the most powerful states in their respective regions.



THE DEFINING RELATIONAL ELEMENT OF THE BRICS IS THAT THEY HAVE RECENTLY BECOME CAPABLE OF PROVIDING SOME SEMBLANCE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE TO THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The VI BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil was held from 14th to 16th July, 2014. The theme chosen for the summit was “Inclusive Growth: Sustainable Solutions.”⁷⁰ In Brasília, on the 16th, a working session was held between the Leaders of BRICS and the Heads of State and/or Government of South America.⁷¹ The dialogue between BRICS Leaders and their South American counterparts reflects the priority accorded to developing countries in the BRICS outreach strategy.⁷² This is in consonance with the BRICS geopolitical strategy to achieve the status of an alternative platform for the problems related to the developing economies. The major achievement of the 2014 BRICS summit was that “the Summit adopted the Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan, the Agreement on the New Development Bank (NBD), the Treaty for the Establishment of a BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and agreements among BRICS

69 Spykman 1942.

70 BRICS 2014.

71 BRICS 2014.

72 BRICS 2014.

Development Banks and Export Credit Insurance Agencies.”⁷³ The CRA is an additional line of defense available to the BRICS countries in scenarios of Balance of Payments’ difficulties. The NBD will finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects.⁷⁴

Therefore, an argument can be made from the traditional geopolitics perspective of the BRICS being present at strategic locations vis-à-vis the West. The relative geopolitical isolation of the United States is perhaps threatened by the location of Brazil in the western hemisphere and in Latin America, south of the US. Furthermore, the overt engagement of the Chinese in the BRICS grouping creates a hitherto unknown dimension in traditional geopolitical thinking.

CONCLUSION

The dominant understanding of regions in the field of geography is that regions display a certain degree of homogeneity in their constitution through common traits and features. In some instances, regions are defined by their functional linkages in the form of nodes and network which is translated into homogeneity. However, many scholars point out that there has been a flawed acceptance of the concept of region as in many cases, the conceptualization of region has been purely on the basis of the certain given notions about the region which exist in the minds of the people. In the 1970s and 1980s, in line with the general trend of the social sciences, the study of the regions, regionalism and regionalization also adopted the means and methods of social constructivism. The trend continued with the rise of new regionalism which followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the gradual inception of neo-liberal global capitalism into the world economic system.

Some scholars further developed the earlier themes and stressed on the value of understanding the world through the presence of territorial networks, global assemblages and networked cities and space of flows. This was underlined by the realization that spaces in general and regions in particular are more clearly legible through the relational understanding of space. The relational approach rests on the premise that proximate and

73 BRICS 2014.

74 BRICS 2014.

distant social, political and economic relations create assemblages which might not always conform to the territorial notions of the nation and the state and can group together at any scale.

Regions in the international system remain in the territorial conception rather than the relational conception as they are constituted by a group of states with territorial configuration. However, in the case of the BRICS, the relational aspect of regionalization is manifest as the BRICS states visualize themselves together in the globalized world even though they are not territorially contiguous. The underlying relational nature of the BRICS is that they are products of globalization and are regional powers in their respective regional locations. Such geopolitical imagination has resulted in strategic regionalization for the BRICS vis-à-vis the West because the defining relational element of the BRICS is that they have recently become capable of providing some semblance of global governance to the developing world.

The setting up of the New Development Bank for loans to the developing countries with less stringent conditions than the IMF and the World Bank plus the Contingency Reserve Fund for the BRICS states in times of crisis provides a relational challenge to the West. In the long run, it is possible that the BRICS Bank may provide the infrastructural support that the developing world needs the most. Still, the success of such ventures by the BRICS depends on the competitiveness vis-à-vis the established institutions of the West and the inclusiveness in the decision making processes within the BRICS, because at the present moment the Chinese influence on all the upcoming institutions of the BRICS is very huge, which partly is a result of the massive proportion of Chinese funding in these institutions. There is also a possibility of undermining the BRICS structure due to the recent creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) again under Chinese tutelage and which has been endorsed and joined by many European countries including the United Kingdom, France and Germany, the three European economic powerhouses.

In hard geopolitical terms the BRICS challenge the West through the geographical presence of the BRICS states in all the major continents of the world. Russia, owing to its huge size, is present in both Europe and Asia; China is the regional power in Asia; and the three states of India, South Africa and Brazil are regional powers in the continents of South Asia, Africa and South America respectively. It is through such critical geopolitical deconstruction of the BRICS, that they can be understood to be a hard geopolitical grouping. The geopolitical imagination is possible through the relational conception of the state.

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by S. Paz

THE CITIES ARE UNABLE TO CONTROL THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND PEOPLE DO NOT RESPECT THE PLACES WHERE THEY LIVE. NOBODY IS ABLE TO MANAGE THE RUBBISH. SEGREGATION AND RECYCLING ARE THE JOB FOR PEOPLE COMING FROM THE LOWEST SOCIAL STRATA, FOR WHOM IT IS THEIR ONLY SOURCE OF INCOME (SHIMLA, STAN HIMACHAL PRADESH, 2015).