

BRICS and the New Arab Revolutions

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The political unrest and upheaval sweeping many Arab countries has coincided with the expansion of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) grouping into BRICS, with the addition of South Africa. These five countries are among the most important non-Western powers on the world stage, and their views and policies matter on a host of issues, including the new Arab revolutions that started from early this year.

Unlike in past world history, major power shifts now are being brought about not by battlefield victories or new geopolitical alignments, but by a factor unique to our modern world — rapid economic growth, even as the importance of military power remains intact. The ongoing shifts in power are tectonic in nature and will profoundly impact international relations and international security.

BRICS symbolizes these power shifts. While we know the world is in transition, the contours of a new world order are not yet visible. The shifts point toward a very different new world order.

The BRICS, in fact, can be called the R-5 after the names of its members' currencies — real, rouble, rupee, renminbi and rand.

Background on BRICS

The BRIC concept, conceived in 2001 by a Goldman Sachs economist, was embraced by the four original countries themselves only in 2008 when their foreign ministers met on the sidelines of the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral. The expansion of RIC into BRIC through Brazil's addition created a potentially powerful bloc, given the projections that the BRIC nations could surpass the present leading economies of the world by the middle of this century.

The inclusion of South Africa in 2011 made the BRICS grouping more global. But the expanded BRICS has made redundant another grouping — IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa). With India, Brazil and South Africa all part of BRICS, IBSA risks fading into irrelevance.

It is true that there is little in common among the BRICS states, prompting cynics to call BRICS an acronymic ingenuity with no substance. But just because the BRICS nations do not constitute a formal bloc at present cannot detract from BRICS' long-term potential at a time of major power shifts in the world. The qualitative reordering of power under way symbolizes the birth-pangs of a new world order. The world clearly is at a defining moment in its history. In that light, new forums like BRICS could evolve as important instruments to bring about change in the global architecture.

BRICS, by acting as a pressure group, can be a catalyst to international reform, including an overhaul of the Bretton Woods system and the creation of a supranational currency as the world's reserve currency. Considering that BRICS represents more than 25 percent of the Earth's landmass and over 40 percent of its population, the grouping holds great potential.

Response of BRICS to Arab Upheavals

All the BRICS states are currently members of the United Nations Security Council: China and Russia are permanent members, and India, Brazil and South Africa are rotating members but are seeking permanent representation to match their growing world influence. The ongoing reshuffling of the political landscape in the Middle East and North Africa has

opened new space for BRICS to influence international deliberations on how to respond to this turmoil.

Libya served as the first test for BRICS. When United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 to establish a no-fly zone over Libya was adopted on March 17, 2011, BRICS was still the four-nation BRIC. (South Africa joined the grouping in April at the summit meeting in Sanya, China.) When Resolution 1973 was put to vote, the four original members of BRIC, plus Germany, chose to abstain.

These five abstainers are large countries in terms of both land area and size of their economy. Their decision not to back the U.S.-British-French initiative against Libya exposed the divisions in the international community on the Libya issue. Germany, a key NATO member, followed up its abstention from the UNSC vote by refusing to participate at all in NATO's Libyan operation, saying military intervention is not the solution to that country's problems. South Africa, by contrast, voted for Resolution 1973, contending that the international community "could not be silent nor be seen to be doing nothing in the face of grave acts of violence committed against innocent civilians" by the Libyan government.

Significantly, China and Russia chose not to block the adoption of Resolution 1973. Rather than exercise their veto power, they merely abstained.

Yet no sooner had the resolution been passed than both Moscow and Beijing began criticizing the military action in Libya. Russia, for example, issued a statement just three days after the resolution's adoption and the start of the U.S.-led bombing mission to call for a ceasefire. "Moscow notes with regret this armed action, taken in conjunction with the hastily passed UN Security Council Resolution 1973," the statement said.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin went so far as to say the resolution was "defective and flawed" as it "allows for everything" and resembled "medieval calls for crusades." In a sign of an emerging rivalry between the top two Russian leaders in the run-up to the Russian presidential election, President Dmitry Medvedev said Putin's description of the resolution was "unacceptable," warning that such comments could "lead to a clash of civilizations."

China, after abstaining from the Security Council vote, began voicing its disapproval of the Western bombing raids, saying it was deeply concerned about civilian casualties caused by the airstrikes and warned of a humanitarian disaster. Yet China's abstention moved it further away from its longstanding foreign policy based on non-intervention.

In the past, China has repeatedly used its veto power to block or dilute Security Council measures targeting countries like Zimbabwe, Myanmar and Sudan for alleged human-rights violations. But its changing foreign policy became evident in February this year when it voted in favor of a Security Council sanctions resolution on Libya.

Brazil and India, for their part, argued that the Libyan issue cannot be resolved by military means and urged all sides to seek a peaceful resolution. India, for example, said that it "views with grave concern the continuing violence, strife and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Libya. It regrets the air strikes that are taking place. The measures adopted should mitigate — and not exacerbate — an already difficult situation for the people of the country."

The BRICS have played a low-key role on the other Arab upheavals, including in Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Syria, and Yemen.

But the people's revolution in Egypt prompted China to tighten its already stringent censorship of the Internet and other electronic communications to smother any hint of anti-

government sentiment. Ever since revolts began to ricochet through the Middle East and North Africa, Chinese authorities began stepping up efforts to crush any move to organize protests in China. The Chinese censors now prevent Google searches of words not only like “freedom” and “human rights,” but also “Tahiri Square” and “spring revolution.”

Larger Implications

The responses of Western powers and the BRICS nations to the political turmoil in much of the Arab world have been a study in contrast. Whereas the principal Western powers other than Germany have pursued an activist approach to ensure that the Arab world does not slip out of Western control, the BRICS states have followed a hands-off approach, viewing with concern both the internal developments in the Arab countries and the role of some external players.

On Libya, BRICS has been concerned about the larger and longer-term implications. From initially seeking to protect civilians to now aiming for regime change in Libya, the mission creep that has characterized the growing U.S.-British-French military involvement in that country raises troubling questions about their Libyan strategy and the risks that it could end up creating — however inadvertently — a jihadist citadel at the southern doorstep of Europe.

After having tacitly encouraged and endorsed the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain to crush peaceful protests against an absolute monarchy, the military intervention in Libya indeed has helped highlight a selective approach to the promotion of freedom and the protection of civilians — an approach reinforced by these powers’ continuing support to other Western-backed Arab regimes that have employed disproportionate force to quell popular uprisings or unrest at home.

The United States, Britain and France must be applauded for enunciating the goal to prevent civilian slaughter. The free world cannot stand by while tyrants use military forces to massacre civilians. But any intervention — whether military in nature or in the form of economic and diplomatic sanctions — must meet the test of impartiality, if tyrannical rulers are to be stopped from unleashing untrammelled repression.

Some of the BRICS states have acknowledged that the political upheaval in the Arab world is tectonic in nature, with the potential to transform the Middle East and North Africa in the same way that the 1989 Berlin Wall’s fall fundamentally changed Europe. Indeed, 1989 was such a watershed in world history that the most-profound geopolitical changes have occurred in the period since in the most-compressed historical timeframe. Yet, with the same regimes and practices firmly entrenched for decades, much of the Arab world had escaped change. Now, the tumult in the Arab world represents a belated reaction — a yearning for change that signals a grassroots democratic awakening.

But will this awakening lead to democratic empowerment of the masses? After all, there is a wide gulf between democratic awakening and democratic empowerment. The air of expectancy in the Arab world today parallels the new hope that emerged in the East bloc in 1989. Yet history rarely moves in a linear or predictable fashion. While it is now clear that much of the Arab world is in transition from the present order, it is not clear what it is in transition to.

In 1989, an American scholar, Francis Fukuyama, smugly claimed in an essay that made him famous that the Cold War’s end marked the end of ideological evolution, “the end of history,” with the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” Yet two decades after the Cold War’s end, the global spread of democracy is still encountering strong headwinds. In fact, a new bipolar, Cold War-style ideological divide

has re-emerged in the world. The rise of authoritarian capitalism — best symbolized by China — has created a new international model that competes with (and openly challenges) liberal democracy.

Latest developments indeed are a reminder that democratic empowerment hinges on complex factors in any society — both endogenous and exogenous. Internally, two factors usually hold the key: the role of security forces, and the technological sophistication of a state's repressive capacity.

In recent months, security forces have helped shape developments in different ways in three Arab states. While the popular uprising in Yemen has splintered the security establishment there, the Bahraini monarchy has employed foreign Sunni mercenaries that dominate its police force to quell protests, predominantly by the Shiite.

In Egypt, it was the military's refusal to side with Hosni Mubarak that helped end that ex-air force commander's three-decade-long rule. The military, long part of the political power structure, had become increasingly wary of Mubarak's efforts to groom his son as his successor. Today, the heady talk of freedom cannot obscure the reality that the people's revolution in Egypt thus far has spawned only a direct military takeover, with the 30-year emergency law still in force and the country's political direction uncertain.

As for the second key internal factor, a state's ability to effectively police cellphone calls, electronic messages, e-mail and access to the Internet has become as important as a well-oiled security apparatus. The use of social networking sites and instant messaging to organize mass protests has made national capability to enforce stringent, real-time censorship of electronic communications critical.

Take one of the BRICS states, China — its internal-security system extends from state-of-the-art surveillance and extralegal detention centers to an army of paid informants and neighborhood patrols looking out for troublemakers. In response to Internet calls for people to gather on Sundays at specific sites in Shanghai and Beijing to help launch a molihua (jasmine) revolution, China bared a new strategy: preemptively flood the protest-designated squares with police to leave no room for protesters.

External factors are especially important in small or internally weak countries. Nothing illustrates this better than Bahrain. The broadening of the Libya intervention from a limited, humanitarian mission to an all-out assault on the Libyan military suggests that this war is really about larger geopolitical interests of some Western powers. The intervention also was driven by a cold geopolitical calculation: to bottle up or eliminate Muammar Qaddafi so that his regime doesn't exploit the political vacuum in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia.

Some of the BRICS states are concerned that even if the Qaddafi regime collapses under the mounting military attacks, recreating a unified, stable Libya free of Islamist groups may prove difficult. Saddam Hussein's ouster by the invading U.S. forces did not yield the desired results; rather a once-stable, secular Iraq has been destabilized, radicalized and effectively partitioned. With Libya set to become Obama's Iraq, a plausible scenario there is a protracted stalemate, coupled with a tribally partitioned country.

The resort to different standards and practices in the name of promoting human freedom, unfortunately, sends the message that democratic empowerment in any society is possible only if it is in the great powers' geopolitical interest. This also plays into the hands of the world's largest, oldest and most-powerful autocracy, China, which has long accused the West of using promotion of democracy as a geopolitical tool.

China can only be pleased that the U.S., despite the erosion in its relative economic power, has plunged into a third war; China (like Russia) thus gladly chose not to veto the UN Security Council resolution authorizing the intervention in Libya.

More fundamentally, the issue for BRICS is whether there should be a rules-based international order or an order pivoted on military might and driven by the narrow interests of the most powerful.

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