

BRICS and the Future of Multilateralism

By [Beenish Sultan](#) and [Andrew Korybko](#)
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Region: [Asia](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#),
[Russia and FSU](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Ms. Beenish Sultan, a Ph.D. student at Pakistan's National Defence University, conducted the following interview with Andrew Korybko as part of her research on the topic of BRICS and the post-Cold War order:

Andrew Korybko: What in your opinion is the future of 'multilateralism' and the rise of major powers like China and Russia against the US?

Beenish Sultan: I think that we'll see complicated and sometimes ever-changing multilateral partnerships forming in the future that are more functionally effective than the big "talking clubs" of BRICS, the G20, and other groups. What I mean is that tangible goals like defeating terrorism, bringing peace to a war-torn country, or using national currencies in trade are a lot easier to pursue than ambitious but vague ones of defeating the US, for example. Larger platforms will continue to be important in gathering like-minded states and setting broad objectives, but it'll really come down to so-called "working groups" within these organizations to actually get something done.

Great Powers like China, Russia, and Pakistan will take the lead in actually achieving results, whereas smaller- and medium-sized states such as Nepal and Uzbekistan, for example, will generally just tag along and bandwagon. That said, it would be a mistake to overlook the strategic importance that some of these smaller- and medium-sized states could play in certain contexts, since they might be the key to making or breaking a multilateral "working group", meaning that the most diplomatically adroit of them could "balance" between the US and its rivals to their supreme benefit. This could, however, also be exploited by America for divide-and-rule purposes.

AK: Can BRICS as an organization be the champion of multilateralism in the post-Cold War order?

BN: Personally, I'm not too optimistic about BRICS and I look at it as being more of a "talking club" than anything significant. It's encouraging that the five countries meet every year and issue high-sounding statements about expanding their cooperation and other vague things, and it certainly makes for popular photo-ops that play enormously well to their domestic audiences, but BRICS hasn't really accomplished anything of note. Granted, there is a currency reserve system in place and a development bank, but these still leave a lot to be desired and aren't the driving engines behind the [emerging Multipolar World Order](#) that are needed to take multilateralism (in this instance, in the financial sense) to the next level.

A lot of BRICS' failings have to do with the group pretty much being a collection of three bilateral relationships between Russia-China, Russia-India, and India-China, with South Africa

and Brazil apparently tacked on for symbolism's sake to say that the organization has a presence in each continent of the "Global South". Those two aforementioned non-Eurasian members, however, barely contribute to BRICS and are treated more as objects than subjects, though that's understandable given the power and economic asymmetries between them and the three others. On top of that, China wants to use BRICS as a platform for spreading the [Belt & Road Initiative](#) through the BRICS+ concept, while India is opposed to this and could obstruct it.

AK: What is the future of international organizations in the post-Cold War world order, particularly when it comes to BRI?

BS: International organizations and institutions will remain important in the future, especially because of BRI, but that paradigm-changing global vision will seek to establish alternative ones that can eventually replace their Western counterparts. These newer ones will prospectively be Chinese-centric, though not necessarily Chinese-controlled (even if there might be a grey line between the two). The transition from Western-/US-controlled international bodies to Chinese-centric/-controlled ones will present the opportunity for third-party entities to sprout up and "balance" between the two, but this won't be a 21st-century revival of the Non-Aligned Movement. Instead, there might not even be a formal umbrella organizing its members, nor any official acknowledgement from any likeminded countries that this movement even exists, since it could just take place somewhat spontaneously on a case-by-case basis when it comes to "working groups" and might not be preplanned or even capable of being organized.

This development could be a double-edged sword for the US and China because each could attempt to instrumentalize this trend to undermine the international bodies that the other controls. The resultant competition could take both kinetic and non-kinetic forms. The first-mentioned will most likely be relied upon by the US in carrying out [Color Revolutions](#), [Hybrid Wars](#), and coups against targeted states, while the latter would probably be utilized more by China in seeking to court other countries' "deep states" (permanent military, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies) by giving their members' affiliated companies preferential (and ultimately very profitable) trading arrangements within BRI that are much more sustainable than the suitcases full of cash that America is known for. This will further reinforce the notion that international organizations are objects of the New Cold War between the US and China instead of independent subjects in their own right.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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