

# What If Soft Power Becomes the New “Weapon” for World Leadership? Considerations on the Debate in Relation to the New World Order

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**ABSTRACT:** Currently, there is much debate among scholars about whether or not the global order is changing. Although the debate is open, it is undeniable that the growing presence of “new emerging powers”, such as the BRICS, has undoubtedly begun to reshape the international system. Based on realist and neo-realist theories, we believe that “soft power” will play an important role in the future as a driver of this global change. Indeed, The BRICS are devoting a lot of energy in order to instigate change, and above all they have been able to take advantage of the supposed "decline" of the West. In any event, it will be necessary to understand whether their interest in improving their "charm power" is real or if is only a means of claiming future world leadership.

**KEYWORDS:** soft power, global order, BRICS, governance, neo-realism

## Introduction

The cold war period taught us many things. Among these, one of the most important is that it is undoubtedly difficult for direct armed conflicts between superpowers to occur. As highlighted in the neorealist theory of Kenneth Waltz (1979), a classic of political thought, the bipolar world remained stable because the two superpowers (the US and the USSR) never faced each other directly, but only in third-party territories (Vietnam, Korea, etc.). In short, if there is something that recent history has taught us, it is that two militarily strong powers, which can potentially self-annihilate, will hardly ever come into direct confrontation. In fact, if even one of the two were to win over the other, in any event, this conflict would result in the winner being weakened to its own detriment, and therefore become more fragile. Consequently, according to the Hobbesian theory (1968) of the “state of nature”, which supports the realist and neorealist vision of international relations, what dominates human relations, as well as those between states, is the fear of mutual destruction. A country that has a certain military capacity would never clash with another country that has the same capacity because of the fear of becoming, if not defeated, certainly gravely damaged.

Compared to the world of the cold war, we currently live in a time of great uncertainty precisely because that balance of power between these two countries has been dissolved. Nowadays, we live in a world that has been described with many different expressions: a multipolar world, a "multiplex" world (Acharya 2017), a world in which regional powers have grown (Buzan and Ole 2004) and in which new emerging powers are trying to lay claim to ever greater importance. Regardless of how we describe it, what is certain is that we live in a time in which there is no longer a single center of power, or two power blocks, as came to pass in the post-WWII world. By definition, neorealist theory always states that a multipolar world is inherently unstable. Consequently, we wonder in what direction we are heading.

First of all, we state that although the conformation of the international system has changed, in practice the trend to grab resources, seek commercial outlets and increase international participation by states has not. We see this, for example, with the birth of groups of states that join forces in order to reshape a world order which still retains the model that arose from the Bretton Woods system. One example is the bloc of countries called the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which represent a consolidated reality, and which has attempted to collaborate internally in order to increase their individual weight at the international level. Although every member of the group tends to give priority, as is natural, to its own national

interest (Lo 2016), it cannot be denied that this group truly represents a new upheaval in international politics. In fact, what interests us here most is not so much whether these countries have been able to build a new global order or not, which we will briefly discuss, but the means they could employ to present themselves on the world stage as new models of leadership. In fact, considering that these countries would not resort to the use of force with western countries, and that in turn western countries would have little or no interest in waging a direct confrontational war (Pinker 2012), we wonder what “weapon” they could likely use to build a different world. Therefore, given that they are in all likelihood less inclined to use hard power, in all probability, the direction they take will be that of the increasing use of soft power.

If so, then we should ask ourselves what soft power really means, and how effective its use is at the international level. Thus, are these “developing countries” really attempting to reshape the world by increasing their soft power, motivated by fair and serious pretexts? On the other hand, by resorting to this power to attract, are these countries simply utilizing a means by which they can increase their visibility without really undertaking serious and specific reforms?

In practice, we wonder if the BRICS are actually willing to be true leaders, keeping in mind their desire to intensify their soft power, or if they will develop their desire to attract as a theoretical goal only.

### **The debate around the new world order**

There is a persistent discussion as to whether the old-world paradigm, namely the West centric one, is in decline (Acharya 2014; Stuenkel 2016). In particular, among several arguments, there are two which best describe that the west is undergoing a decline: the first is the progressive decline of the US, its increasingly international isolation, and a political drift after the Cold War which resulted in it being unable to deal with the most recent and significant economic crisis (Layne 2012; Mandelbum 2016). The second aspect is linked to an increasingly fragmented European Union, where populism is growing by the day and where problems related to migration, the economic crisis and the distance of European institutions from its citizens have not been resolved (Schmitter 2000). In short, both the US and European countries (within which there are those countries that participated in the construction of the post-world II order, such as France and Great Britain), are experiencing a moment of weakness that for some scholars could represent their short-term decline and a shifting of economic and diplomatic centers to other places (Stuenkel 2016).

While these countries have been experiencing this crisis, other countries such as the BRICS have been increasingly trying to play a more important role internationally (Duggan 2015). In fact, if on the one hand these countries still have multiple points on which they diverge (Lo 2016; Amiel 2019), and frequently have limitations linked to the latest political developments, it is undeniable that their growth actually represents a great upheaval at the international level. Since its inception, the BRICS have always claimed an interest in reshaping world governance, especially from a financial point of view (BRIC 2009). Also, they have repeatedly claimed that the current world order does not reflect, but should reflect, the changes that have taken place. Thus, while on the one hand they have continued to participate in the traditional bodies of the Bretton Woods system (World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, etc.) on the other they have criticized the malfunction of these institutions, and have also highlighted the need to bring about change within the world order. In short, the question is: are the BRICS willing to create a new global order?

It is difficult to answer this question at the moment. In fact, although potentially the BRICS could have the weight and the potential to place themselves in the position of new global models (because of the size of these countries, their economic weight, and large populations<sup>1</sup>), on the other

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<sup>1</sup> “BRICS brings together five major emerging economies, having 23 per cent of the global GDP and around 17 per cent of the share in world trade (they have a combined nominal GDP of USD 16.6 trillion). The five nations account for 50 per cent of the world economic growth, 42.58 per cent of the world population (over 3.6 billion people), 26.6 of the world land area and 13.24 per cent of World Bank voting power” (Times of India 2019).

hand, their internal divergences have been highlighted as an important limitation which undermines their unity, their effective ability to work together globally and above all their specific ability to act in unison (Downie & Williams 2018). Although they have made great strides, for example, by creating the New Development Bank (NDB), which plays a very important role in their relationships, as well as representing a different and parallel model when compared to the Bretton Woods institutions (Abdenur & Folly 2015), these countries still diverge in several areas. For example, regarding the reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where despite the fact that the P5 member countries (Russia and China) in theory support Brazil, India and South Africa's desire to join the UNSC, in practice they have done next to nothing in specific terms to promote their entry (Abb & Jetschke 2019). Furthermore, diverging economic interests could create frictions between countries such as India and China as has been the case of the "silk and road" initiative, for example (Basile & Cecchi 2018). At the same time there could be additional problems related to the above-mentioned divergence of interests.

In short, at the moment their ability to effectively bring about change at a global level is limited by national interests that prevent them from working in unison. However, it is also true that they are working to boost their soft power, and increase their global presence. Thus, while on the one hand differences still persist, it is undeniable that they could gradually exert a strong influence, especially within the context of the countries of the Global South. This could represent an anti-West block, which due to the historical colonial presence and racist policies (Rodney 1972), could fuel a global blockade against the West. This situation could actually provide a decisive impetus to the construction of a new order (all of which remains in line with Waltz's neorealist theory). Therefore, not only will military capacity count, but above all the ability to decisively influence in terms of soft power. So, is it plausible to propose that soft power could become an important weapon in the hands of these emerging countries? Can soft power be a means of building a new global hegemony and creating a new order?

Before we come to any conclusions, let's briefly analyze what we mean by soft power, and what use the BRICS are making of it.

### **BRICS and soft power: what type of soft power will they choose to use?**

Soft power, according to Joseph Nye (2004), can be explained as the ability to influence others to get the outcomes one wants without the use of coercion. In other words, soft power involves leading by example, without recurring to economic constraints and/or the use of an army.

The BRICS countries, mainly as a result of the crises that have afflicted them in recent years, are struggling to find a credible role in this area. From this point of view, Western countries still provide models that are more attractive than those of the BRICS. In the soft power field, the BRICS "face their most serious shortcomings relative to the West when it comes to serving as role models" (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016). However, there are multiple examples of how they have tried to initiate campaigns to promote their cultural influence to the rest of the world. This situation led Hillary Clinton to argue that "we are engaged in an information war, and we are losing that war" (Jacobs 2012). This citation refers to the ever growing presence of state-backed media outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and CCTV.

In recent years, the BRICS have begun a massive campaign, both individually and as a group, to improve their image and strengthen their soft power (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016; Stuenkel 2016). This is an important aspect of their growing power because they presumably feel there is a gap to be filled in terms of their "charm power". Hand in hand with economic growth and the emergence of an ever increasing presence of the BRICS in different areas of the world (Ross 2018; Shukla 2018), the expenditure that these countries have made in the field of soft power has also grown. We can provide some examples in this regard. Indeed, in 2009, China launched a project "with a \$6.58 billion budget called *waixuan gongzuo*, which can be translated as "overseas propaganda", while at the same time it has spent a significant amount on spreading its culture and language by means of the so-called 'Confucius Institutes' initiative (Beeson and

Xu 2016; Stuenkel 2016), just to give some examples. Russia has created several channels in which it is increasingly trying to spread its own ideas, such as Russia Today (RT), an international television network funded by the Russian government, in order to challenge the US's power in this field. Moreover, "Russia reorganized the RIA Novosti news agency and laid off a significant part of its staff, including its relatively independent management. The agency's new leader then announced the launch of Sputnik, a government-funded network of news hubs in more than thirty countries with 1,000 staff members producing radio, social media, and news-wire content in local languages" (Stuenkel 2016). The examples go on: such as Brazil's interest in becoming leaders in peace and security, South African commitment to human rights, and India's bolstering of its image in the media and the creation of Bollywood to challenge the US's power in the film industry, just to name a few (Chatin and Gallarotti 2016). Therefore, although there is a long way to go, the BRICS are attempting to fill this gap in soft power.

Although primacy over soft power still remains in the hands of Western powers, often these new emerging powers have tried to show a different and oftentimes, more compromised image on important issues: on climate change (Kosolapova 2017), on the development of the Global South, on the importance of non-intervention in other states so as to respect their sovereignty.

The real question is if these countries are really interested in upholding their claims, given that on some issues currently, their responses have been "contradictory": for example, they still depend on obsolete energies (Hurrell & Sengupta 2012; Basso & Viola 2016) and of course there are still gaps in their capacity to work in unison and act as true representatives of a new world order (Thakur 2014; Downie & Williams 2018).

Thus, will they be able to overcome their limitations and drive change in this field? Will these countries be able to shape the global imaginary with their growth and power in the field of soft power?

## **SOFTPOWER in the WEST**

In western countries, although their soft power still remains stronger than that of the rest of the world, important things have yet to be clarified. Firstly, western countries are experiencing several issues that highlight deep fragmentation, or more specifically, a change in paradigm that could undermine their centrality in terms of their "charm power" in the future. For example, regarding the issue of climate change, there are several contradictions in the behavior of both Europe and the USA (Carrington 2017; Meade 2018). Moreover, there are also issues in other areas that could undermine their solidity. For example, in addition to the BREXIT process, the serious internal divisions between EU members states which have emerged as a result of both economic and political problems, such as the debate on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), has exacerbated European fragility. Not to mention the issue of migrants, which given the internal divisions that European states are experiencing, represents a very serious problem for which solutions remain to be found. However, the issue could also be related to a stagnant economy that suffered severe blows after the 2008 crisis and is still struggling to fully recover. Finally, we should also take into consideration divisions that have appeared in EU/US relations (Carrel & Nienaber 2018; Batabyal 2018; Mansfield 2018).

In short, while on the one hand Western countries have always had primacy in terms of charm power, at the moment they may be entering into crisis from this point of view. Thus, considering that their power of attraction is likely to be undermined, it would be legitimate to ask whether in the future these new emerging countries will be able to exercise greater influence than the West.

## **Conclusions**

There are many topics to be covered. First of all, the BRICS still lack cohesion, despite their proclamations to the contrary both in public and during their summits. Furthermore, each BRICS member country, as mentioned, seems to be pursuing policies pertaining solely to national interest

rather than those of interest to the group as a whole. However, what would happen if these countries actually managed to exert real “charm power” on the rest of the world?

Quite probably, they would gain the advantage of being able to place themselves seriously as real alternative states within the current international system. The historical colonial weight exercised by European powers, as well as by the US, especially in “third countries”, would play in their favor. The growing presence of the BRICS in the so-called Global South has grown. Therefore, we may conclude that the BRICS, if they were to take advantage of their growing supremacy, and really managed to become leaders of the Global South, could quite possibly represent models of charm power as well as commercial and cultural partners for these countries. Positions taken in favor of certain countries which have been sanctioned by the West, as in the case of Iran, or the intervention in Venezuela, undoubtedly represent decisive steps in this direction.

However, we are aware that there are limitations. As previously mentioned, there are divisions among the BRICS, especially since the election of Bolsonaro. This initially raised many concerns, especially in relation to threats of realignment with the US. But this problem, over time, has highlighted that Brazil, not only has China as one of its privileged trading partners, but also that, after the threat of sanctions by the US administration, risked losing a privileged position within the BRICS, where it enjoys considerable influence. This is something it would not have within other alliances (Casarões 2018).

In short, the historic moment in which we are living has many things to teach us. However, following the logic of a possible global change, soft power will certainly play an important role in the future. In fact, if the BRICS were to become solid allies, and really overcome those limitations that undermine a more united vision as a group, in all likelihood these countries could truly represent a new leading group, within which China would probably hold a central role. Regarding China, it has not been by chance that in the recent Coronavirus pandemic, after being the country most seriously affected, it has now revindicated its global leadership in dealing with the virus. Indeed, this could be probably be interpreted as a means by which it can reinforce its soft power as a “weapon” (Morten & Gramer 2020; Ninio 2020).

And what about the West? Perhaps in the West the time has come to really question the economic, cultural and social model that it has promoted to date. Perhaps the time has come again to ask what role politics must play and above all, to try to recover its protagonism, something that has been lost at the expense of economic interests. In fact, on many occasions the very meaning of the common good has been distorted, and western powers have in all likelihood designed a global governance system which acts in the opposite way to what one would expect. Perhaps it is time to rediscover the meaning of *governance with a human face*, as Falk (1995) said, and try to build a future which is increasingly linked to the problems of individuals.

It is probably beginning by redefining human governance, and building a direct connection to citizens that we could also build a different type of soft power in the future. In all likelihood, if we are really to give priority to these “problems without passports” (Annan 2009) connected to climate change, migration, international trade, and relations with the global south, then perhaps we can continue to enjoy a primacy in terms of soft power.

In any event, it is very likely that the field of soft power will play a decisive role in the future global order.

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