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No. 052/2012 dated 26 March 2012

BRICS for a New Global Order

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Synopsis

The Fourth BRICS Summit in Delhi this week will focus on deepening financial cooperation and developing common positions on the current crises in the Middle East. However the rising non-Western powers are not out to form an anti-West bloc.

Commentary

AS THE leaders of China, India, Russia, Brazil and South Africa meet in Delhi this week (28-29 March), one cannot but wonder how an improbable concept from Wall Street - the heart of Western capitalism – could have such a remarkable influence in the international system. Coined a decade ago by Goldman Sachs to promote an investment fund in emerging markets, BRICS is now either lionised or denounced as a countervailing bloc against the West.

For many in the developing world, chafing under Western dominance since the end of the Cold War, the BRICS forum has emerged as the definitive new tribune and a potential foundation for different and more equitable world order. For those in the West, so accustomed to dominating the international political discourse during the last two decades, the prospect of a powerful non-Western bloc is deeply disconcerting.

Evolution of BRICS

To be sure, the leaders of the BRICS themselves have never made exalted claims for their forum. It is the supporters and critics who have invested the forum with a lot more political weight than it could perhaps carry. In the near term, BRICS will focus on small and incremental steps towards the consolidation of a grouping which is both politically diverse and geographically disparate.

As the nations currently contributing the largest share of world economic growth, the BRICS now want to transform the global financial structures that have been dominated by the West for centuries. That the global financial system has become crisis-ridden amidst the failure of the Western regulatory systems has given a rare opportunity for the non-Western powers to seek its transformation and a say in its future management.

The BRICS is being built on the foundation of a Russia-China-India strategic dialogue that was launched a decade ago. The initiative was a Russian one while Brazil joined the forum in 2009 to constitute the first summit at Yekaterinburg, Russia. The second summit was held in Brasilia in 2010 and South Africa joined the forum at the Third Summit held in Sanya, Hainan last year.

Located in different corners of the world, BRICS is not about promoting regionalism that has had so much success in Europe and East Asia. Its vision is naturally global. In the last three years, the BRICS has sought greater coordination among the emerging powers on international issues - from food and energy security to sustainable development - that are of greatest concern to the non-Western powers.

The Sanya summit saw for the first time the emergence of some concrete proposals in the area of finance. At the initiative of Beijing, a framework agreement was signed for cooperation in the banking sector and the leaders agreed to consider the prospects for trade in local currencies.

Bigger goals

The Delhi summit is likely to examine a proposal to create an inter-governmental development bank by the BRICS nations. The summit is also likely to extend solid support to the business communities from their countries to deepen trade and investment ties. However the declarations from the Delhi summit will also indicate how the BRICS manage some of their current differences on global political issues, particularly relating to the Middle East.

On Syria, China and Russia had vetoed a recent Arab League sponsored resolution in the United Nations Security Council, while India and South Africa have voted for it. The recent Presidential statement from the Council on Syria reflected a consensus that should facilitate a common position among the BRICS in favour of a ceasefire in Syria and negotiations between the government and the opposition.

On Iran, the BRICS have a common interest in a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis and preventing a confrontation between the West and Iran, while disagreeing with the United States and Europe on the unilateral sanctions against Iran.

Not an anti-West bloc

More broadly, the BRICS have deep concerns over the current Western attempts at regime change in different parts of the Middle East and the violation of the principle of national sovereignty. Given their shared concerns about international terrorism, the BRICS are also likely to express their common anxiety about the future of Afghanistan amidst the US plans to withdraw after a decade of fighting the insurgency there.

Despite their many differences with the West, the BRICS have no desire to become an anti-Western or anti-American bloc. All the forum members want to build productive relationships with the United States on the basis of equality and with the aim of constructing a genuine multipolar world. The question for the BRICS, then, is how to deepen the democratisation of international relations and modernising global governance rather than countering the West with a non-Western bloc.

During the BRICS summit in Delhi, there will be much interest in Chinese President Hu Jintao's bilateral talks with the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, as the contradictions between China and India constitute the single most important weakness of the BRICS.

There has been intense political effort by Beijing and Delhi in recent months to put their bilateral relations on a more positive footing and manage their differences maturely. President Hu, who last travelled to Delhi in 2006, and Prime Minister Singh are likely to announce some concrete new steps to expand their cooperation in the bilateral, regional and international domains.

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