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## The BRICS on climate change global governance

### Os BRICS na governança global da mudança climática

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#### Abstract

This article aims at assessing the evolution of BRICS' positions on climate change global governance. We discuss the implications of that positioning for the role of the group on that theme. From the analysis of the main regimes and agreements, we argue that although there is a disposition to act in multilateral forums, they face a series of constraints that makes difficult for them to adopt a common ground.

#### Resumo

Este artigo objetiva avaliar a evolução da posição do BRICS na governança global sobre mudança climática. Discute-se as implicações desse posicionamento para o papel do grupo neste tema. A partir da análise dos principais regimes e acordos, argumentamos que embora haja a disposição de agir nos fóruns multilaterais, eles enfrentam uma série de constrangimentos que dificultam a adoção de uma posição comum.

**Key words:** BRICS; Climate Change; Global Governance.

**Palavras chave:** BRICS; Governança Global; Mudança Climática.

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#### Introduction

Currently, a central issue that has gained ground in international relations analysis is climate change. One feature of this research-agenda concerns the attempts to settle conventions and international regimes in order to elaborate norms, rules, and general principles that would gear countries' actions towards some efforts to tackle negative effects of climate change. It also includes the rational use of natural resources in industrial

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productive processes, the capability of transforming high-carbon economies into low ones, and the improvement of domestic infrastructure, etc. In one way or another, the climate problem affects everyone, demanding effective and shared solutions, as the forecast for the future indicates a bad climate and environment scenarios.

In this context, equally important are the institutional mechanisms by which the negotiations and agreements are settled. As it is a general problem, we should hope that all affected have ways to participate and contribute to eventual solutions, given that the responsibility to tackle is directly related to the responsibility for causing it. Having said that, the emergent countries, for the recent contribution they have been giving to worsen the climate situation, are central subjects to be considered. Their participation is fundamental if the international community aspire to reach satisfactory results on mitigating negative effects of the problem exposed here. The challenges, however, consists not only of advancing with necessary and sufficient solutions, but especially concerting common positions that tend to follow the same path.

This paper, thus, aims at identifying and assessing the evolution of BRICS<sup>1</sup> positions on global governance for climate change. We hope to gather means to discuss the implications of that positioning for international politics, mainly those that involve the role of emergent countries in multilateral negotiation forums, the possibilities and constraints, and their contributions to agreements and goals related to climate. Besides, this analysis would enable us to delineate future research frameworks, encouraging the continuity of studies in this area.

From the reading of agreements and main results of global negotiation process about climate<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to identify the role assumed by BRICS' countries. A central issue that we have recognized with potential to be explored in this paper is the importance of the proposal of 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (INDC) to the effectiveness of practices intended to address the effects of climate problems.

The discussion presented here deepens in the sense of demonstrating that although the BRICS are willing to actively promote and participate in international regimes related to climate, there are a series of constraints which hinder the adoption of a unique stance. National interests, differences on individual goals, specific energy dilemmas and disagreements about binding commitments are factors that explain these hindrances.

Thereby, this paper is divided as follows: after the introduction, the central conferences established about climate change will be highlighted, showing historically how the process of negotiation was settled and the major results achieved. Afterwards, some space will be dedicated to BRICS actions, as well as the implications for the group performance for international politics. On Final Remarks, we will sketch a summary of the main findings that this work has presented.

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1 Cf. O'Neill, 2001.

2 UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol and others COPs.

## International climate regimes: history and accomplishments

The climate issue is historically recent. The debates spread out mainly around the 1970's<sup>3</sup>, and they revealed the need to consider the connections between nature and society, environment and human development, and the sustainability of our production-consumption's model for the next generations as intrinsically as possible. It is difficult, then, to approach these themes without referring to the attempts to establish some general understanding about those links. We assume that climate change is not only an environmental issue, but also an economic, social, and security one (Barros-Platiau, 2010).

In this sense, the starting point after Stockholm was the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in 1990, to evaluate the climate changes and its impacts over the ecosystem, humankind and society. In its central report, the IPCC concludes that the emission of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) by all sorts of human activities is the main cause of current climate changes<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, the international community worked with the endeavor to create an international regime<sup>5</sup> to address these problems, and the establishing of the Conference of Rio (Rio-92)<sup>6</sup> and subsequent arrangements of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), both early in the 1990's, were a turning point on that. The purposes were to introduce and discuss the idea of sustainable development and ecological balance of economic growth, along with the raising importance that the environmental topic was experiencing in recent decades.

The Conferences of Parties (COPs) that followed these negotiations were equally important. They were settled as an annual organization to reach global commitments under UNFCCC's umbrella. Gathering a great number of countries (most of them major emitters of GHG), the COPs witnessed advances and backlashes in terms of establishing an international climate regime. The Convention forecasts that all Parties should prepare national inventories of their emissions of GHG<sup>7</sup>, and subsequently implement some measures to mitigate the negative effects, seeking principally to control the global warming.

One of the most important (and controverted) agreement on UNFCCC was the acknowledgment of the 'Common but Differentiated Responsibility' (CBDR) principle, *i.e.*, that all countries should work with some obligations and goals, but historical and socio-economic issues should be taken into account<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the developed countries and the developing ones held distinct responsibilities. At this point, the countries were divided in two groups: the developed included in a category designated

3 The first global conference on environment was at Stockholm 1972, named United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.

4 To avoid deep modifications on planet's natural conditions, the IPCC has recommended that is necessary to prevent the elevation of earth's temperature above 2°C until 2050. Cf. IPCC, 1990.

5 Regime will be considered as a formal or informal organized arrangement in which the principles, norms, rules and decision-taking procedures reflect the voluntary action of the States. Its operation, however, depends on the engagement of the most interested actors in its functioning. Cf. Krasner, 2009.

6 The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Cf. <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>>.

7 Cf. UNFCCC, 2015.

8 Cf. UNFCCC, 1990, mainly Article 3.1.

Annex-I (most members of OECD at that time), carrying more responsibility and obligation on reducing GHG emission; and the ‘rest’ with no legal binding on that. Another central feature was the incorporation of resource and technology transfers to developing countries by the major powers<sup>9</sup>, in order to fight some negative effects of climate change and to adapt their economies to a more sustainable pattern (Barros-Plataiu, 2010, 2011; Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012).

In fact, authorities from the BRICS have emphasized that the key to succeed in climate negotiations lies in commitments’ taking by rich countries to reduce GHG emissions, while simultaneously boosting funding to developing countries in the form of aid and promotion of clean technology (Leal-Arcas, 2013). Therefore, financial<sup>10</sup> and technology transferred by the former is a good incentive to encourage these countries to commit to some climate regime (Omuko, 2014).

During the COPs’ third edition, 1997, the Kyoto Protocol (KP) was negotiated. Broadly speaking, the Protocol established some goals and commitments that put forward differentiated reductions of GHG for each country. The Annex I group should reduce its emissions by 5% in comparison to 1990 in a five-year period (between 2008-2012). On the other hand, for the Non-Annex I – precisely the developing countries – no binding commitment was determined<sup>11</sup>. As there was no consensus about a model to follow, in 2009 the KP was postponed to be discussed in a second term.

During COP 15 (Copenhagen, 2009), when some commitments were expected to happen, the post-Kyoto debates again did not flourish (Barros-Plataiu, 2011). In addition, the BRICS countries had a great participation in that matter, because even without mandatory commitments, the group has taken up voluntary emission reduction targets under the Accord<sup>12</sup>.

## The BRICS’ position

Starting from the point of view that it is no longer possible to solve transnational problems counting only with the major powers, climate change is another challenge that require global responses, even more if we consider that the success of the policies to relieve the negative effects depends on the involvement of emerging countries (Flemes, 2010; Alexandroff and Cooper, 2010). After all, they are, as it known, big GHG’s emitters<sup>13</sup>.

Since the BRICS’ first summit in 2009, the climate issue was considered an important theme on their agenda. Related to energy efficiency, they declare prepared to promote conversations to deal with climate changes in bases of the CBDR principle, considering the need to combine measures to protect the environment with actions toward their goals of socioeconomic development (BRICS, 2009).

9 Especially the United States of America and European Union.

10 Another source they could turn to comes from the recently launched BRICS Bank. Cf. <http://ndbbribs.org>.

11 For that, the US withdraw its participation.

12 One central feature of the Copenhagen Conference was the promise made by developed countries to finance projects related to sustainability and clean energy in an amount about US\$ 100 billion per year by 2020, from many sources (e.g. Clean Developed Mechanism).

13 Emissions in Annex I countries increased by 3.3% in 2010, whereas emissions in non-Annex I continued increasing at 5.6% (IEA, 2012).

In the same year, during COP 15, they announced some quantitative, mid-term targets that they would voluntarily (rather than mandatorily) implement within their own borders to cut down their respective emissions. In this sense, Brazil pledged to reduce its national emissions by 36-39% below 'business as usual' levels by 2020 (Barros-Platiau, 2010). China announced that it would reduce its emissions, in relation to its GDP, to 40-45% (considered as baseline in the year of 2005) by 2020. Russia stated that it would reduce between 10-25% comparing to the 1990's. Finally, India also pledged that it would reduce its emissions, in relation to its GDP, by 20-25% (same 2005 baseline) by 2020 (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). In that Conference the BASIC group was started (including Brazil, South Africa, India and China), and since then their Ministers of Environment have met to coordinate their participation on climate negotiations (Hochtstetler, 2012; Maupin and Sidiropoulos, 2015).

The COP 17, in 2011, was the first one with South Africa integrating the BRICS' group. There all countries reached a consensus stipulating the renewing of KP to a second term. Russia, however, declared no interest in participating, presenting, for that matter, arguments that the developing countries should also commit themselves with legal obligations of emission reduction (Viola and Basso, 2014, 2016).

At the third summit, held in 2013 in Durban, they declared commitment to work towards a comprehensive, balanced and binding outcome to strengthen the implementation of the UNFCCC and KP (BRICS, 2013). More recently, during the Paris Conference (2015), countries declared commitments that, if fully implemented, will limit average temperature increase around 2.7°C in the long-run (BRICS, 2015).

As we said in the Introduction section, our focus here is to explore and analyze some particular points in this general context, so we should now pay special attention to the importance of the proposal of 'INDCs' to the effectiveness of practices foreseeing to tackle the effects of climate problems.

In that way, according to the countries' proposals, their pledges can be perceived as conservative<sup>14</sup> (Viola et al. 2012; Viola and Basso, 2016). For instance, China is not part of the Annex I and is a grand promoter of G77+China coalition, which defends a radical reading of the CBDR principle and tries to push developed countries into reducing their emissions first<sup>15</sup>. In its INDC, China's proposal was general: to reduce carbon intensity of its GDP by 60-65%; to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20%; and to increase the forest stock volume by around 4.5 billion cubic meters, all by 2030 having 2005 numbers as baseline (UN, 2015 *apud* Viola and Basso, 2016). Using the Climate Action Tracker (CAT), 2015,<sup>16</sup> as a tool for ranking, the pledge was considered mild. More ambitious commitments would be required to really move further on a consistent mindset change, with effects on practical terms.

Russia, in turn, among the BRICS countries is the only one in the Annex I group. Some of its emissions decreased about 13% around the first years after the Soviet *debacle* and 2012, mostly due

14 According to the authors (p. 13): 'When a country is mostly in favor of measures which really push climate change mitigation, thus reforming the current regime, it will be classified as reformist; when it opposes such measures it will be classified as conservative'.

15 This can be described as "the race to be second", as Benito Mueller put it, for climate talks (Barros-Platiau, 2010).

16 Cf. <<http://climateactiontracker.org>>.

to reduction of its economic activity, not for its efforts to mitigate the GHG' effects. In its INDC, the Russians pledged to reduce their emissions around 25-30% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels (UN, 2015 *apud* Viola and Basso, 2016; UNFCCC, 2014). According to CAT (2015), that proposal was classified as inadequate, privileging 'natural mechanisms' (capability of their forests to absorb the gases) instead of real changes on its pattern of development and use of energy resources.

India, which is one of the most active defenders of the CBDR, resists to assume commitments that may reflect negatively on its economic trajectory and affect the situation of internal population<sup>17</sup>. In its INDC, India pledged to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33-35% by 2030 from 2005 level and to achieve about 40% cumulative electric power installed capacity from non-fossil fuel based energy resources by 2030 (UN, 2015 *apud* Viola and Basso, 2015). The CAT (2015) classified it as mild. Following CAT's criteria, we also consider it as unambitious.

Brazilian position in the climate regime pledged to reduce its emissions growth, compared to 'business as usual' scenarios, by 36-39% until 2020, and to cut 80% of deforestation by 2020, taken as baseline the year of 2005. In its INDC, Brazil projected to reduce emissions by 37% until 2025 and 43% until 2030, on the same baseline (UN, 2015 *apud* Viola and Basso, 2016). However, increasing the share of sustainable biofuels to approximately 18% by 2030 is not challenging when bioenergy already answered for 17.6% in the transport sector in 2014. Achieving 45% of renewable in the energy mix by 2030 is also not as challenging as their share average 43% between 2004 and 2014. Increasing renewable energy sources other than hydro in the total energy mix between 28-33% by 2030 when they already accounted for 27.9% in 2014 is equally conservative (Viola and Basso, 2016). Brazilian pledge was classified as mild: the country is very close to reaching the objective just by maintaining current policies. The Brazilian INDC is not ambitious.

Finally, South Africa has committed to reduce its GHG emissions by 34% by 2020 and 42% by 2025 under the 'business as usual' baseline (UNFCCC, 2010).

For all that has been presented, it is important to discuss the implications of these positions for international politics issues, especially assessing the BRICS' role on contributing to reach reasonable results, as they are a group seeking to enhance their own influence on global governance.

Firstly, it is clear that there is no common position among them. Not only are the ambitions and proposal scopes different, but also the policies diverge. For instance, while China and South Africa decided to define their goals acknowledging that there is going to be a peak in next decades, and then a very decline from 2030 on, the Indians opted to reduce their GHG emissions progressively. Brazil, in turn, chose to present an absolute contribution. Finally, the Russians opted for some kind of 'natural mechanism' to diminish their emissions (BPC, 2015). That illustrates the difficulty to identify convergent measures over climate issues. Although all of them recognize the necessity and importance of acting on the same ground, in order to amplify the impacts of their actions, there is no synchronized behavior.

<sup>17</sup> As the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi put it directly 'climate change is a concern which needs to be tackled in a framework of cooperation, rather than coercion' (Debidatta, 2015).

Secondly, the Russians present a jarring position among BRICS. In part, that is because they are ranked in Annex I group, so some commitments and obligations rest directly upon them in comparison with the others – which do not have any. For example, Russia is not a supporter of the CBDR principle. In addition, they do not reveal any great interest in modifying their development model based on carbon-intensive, or in altering their energetic matrix, once they have the biggest natural gas reserve and are one of the biggest oil exporters. Finally, continuing with the global warming, some new economic opportunities may open to their frozen lands.

From the perspective of the global governance and multilateral process of negotiation, the climate regime – and its respective obligations and recommendations – shows the difficulties experienced for countries to formulate adequate answers and to assume proper commitments. One of the greatest challenges is that there is an acknowledgment that, in the future, the costs to fight the effects of climate change will be higher if strict measures aren't taken now. Thus, the countries are presenting a short-medium view on foreign policy. Few of them (if any) are willing to sacrifice the economic growth in the name of promoting 'global public good'. In the end, all want to 'free ride' and none wants to 'pay the check'.

Climate change measures taken by BRICS, then, have one central characteristic: there is an overriding objective of economic growth (Omuko, 2014). Therefore, their emission reduction measures are conditioned to the main goal of development. They are taking up actions only in areas in which their economic trajectories would not be hampered. That explains, at least in part, the unambitious features of the pledges.

If we think that all issues involving climate change demand global responses, either the countries assume their unequivocal responsibilities – historical and present – and act in order to coordinate reasonable efforts to mitigate the problem, or another 15 to 30 years of conferences and annual meetings would be necessary. In fact, nature will not support the current model-pattern of development and the use of natural resources. In this last hypothesis, BRICS would miss a great opportunity to show themselves as global leaders, solution-promoters and rule-makers. To become a great power it is necessary to carry on through this path. However, it seems that they are missing the chance<sup>18</sup>.

The BRICS countries showed themselves to be unequivocally divided over their own actions, especially on the matter of climate change. Without any agreement on that fundamental issue, the group seems unlikely to continue playing a central role in climate negotiations.

An effective climate change regime, then, should bring on board and place responsibility on all major GHG emitters in an equitable manner without ignoring, at the same time, the historical responsibilities on the part of developed countries. Therefore, the objective of the UNFCCC to stabilize GHG concentration in the atmosphere would be impossible without any action from BRICS. They must, then, participate in fighting climate change (Leal-Arcas, 2013; Omuko, 2014).

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<sup>18</sup> The BRICS also suffer pressure from other developing/least-developed countries to assume more emphatic measures to combat their GHG emissions – it was very clear at Copenhagen (Hochtstetler, 2012). We may insist on that to illustrate the objections that have been putting over the group to assume the prominent role that is expected from them.

Despite they repeatedly declare having willingness to act more forcefully to fight the problem, BRICS are still opposed to taking up binding emission reduction commitments. They justify this stance with the same argument: historical responsibility and technical improvements – which grips upon the CBDR principle and the financial technological capability of developed countries. In addition, the fact that the developed countries have emitted large amounts of GHG previously does not necessarily mean that BRICS should now be allowed to emit as much as previously emitted by the developed countries. This would not be sustainable to protect the climate system for the present and future generations, mainly because concentration of GHG in the atmosphere is already high (Omuko, 2014).

## Final remarks

This article emphasized the importance of BRICS' participation on climate change regime and its implications for global governance. While they are in some way engaged with voluntary emission reduction measures and show themselves able to play a significant role on this issue, the difficulties imposed by the differences on national interests and disagreements about binding commitments are challenging them.

All of them recognize that an action on global climate change cannot be successful without their involvement. The BRICS today are amongst the largest GHG polluters in the world, so without their efforts the mitigation will be very difficult. However, it seems that another central preoccupation rests in their mind: economic growth. They are not willing to make any sacrifices to tackle a problem that is considered to be caused (historically) mainly by developed countries. For us, that is a sign that they are thinking with short-term view on foreign policy, something that does not correspond to their international ambitions.

In the end, the global governance on climate change seems to have become 'gridlocked', especially by the positions taken by the developing countries. In part, that is true. However, if they want to enhance influence in international politics and seat at the table with the major powers, more has to be done. So far, at least on climate issues, we have not seen anything like that.

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## Nota Press Release

### Climate change and emerging powers: the BRICS' case

What are the relations between emerging powers and global governance on climate change?

In this paper, written by Augusto Rinaldi and Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli, both Ph.D. students on Political Science at University of Sao Paulo (Brazil), it is highlighted this critical issue that is arousing great debate: the role played by emerging powers on climate change global governance, specifically by the group so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). These countries have been on focus for many reasons, but mostly due to its significant contribution in worsening the climate situation, as well as for the difficult to present a shared solution.

Analyzing the most recently regimes and agreements concerning this thematic – mainly the UNFCCC agreements and COPs meetings –, the authors argue that BRICS' members faces a series of constraints that makes difficult for them to adopt a unique stance in this respect.

In this context, an interesting issue that recently has gained scientific approach concerns to the problems related to environment. In special, climate change and its main causes and effects are receiving closely attention from international academic community, as well as from private and non-governmental organizations and observers preoccupied with the consequences of this phenomenon to the globe.

Finally, it is important noting that this research contributes to further comprehension about BRICS' behavior – not only on climate change, but also on other issue-areas –, while simultaneously stimulating future investigations, as the theme is not circumscribed to a specific period or group of countries. In other words, the analysis of emerging powers' role on climate change global governance is a topic that should be constantly reviewed, as the summits and conferences occurs almost yearly and unexpected events may happen related to global warming and earth's change. Consult the article for a more complete discussion.