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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on whether the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are emerging into a coherent political bloc that can challenge the European Union (EU) as a global actor. The Syrian crisis, which erupted in 2011 and is still ongoing, is chosen as a case study to compare the responses of the BRICS and the EU. The paper explores to what extent the BRICS have adopted a cohesive foreign policy position on the Syrian crisis and to what degree this challenges the position of the EU on the issue. In order to examine and compare the positions of the BRICS and the EU, the study conducts an analysis of their official foreign policy discourses and their voting patterns in the United Nations between March 2011 and March 2015. The analysis shows that while the BRICS have strongly opposed military intervention as an option for resolving the crisis, their overall positions were not very cohesive. The main conclusion is that the BRICS have not (yet) developed into a bloc able to challenge the EU.

Introduction: the European Union against a BRICS wall?

In an increasingly complex international system, it is crucial for the European Union (EU) as a foreign policy actor to stay abreast of a changing power context.¹ While the EU has established partnerships with all countries considered to be 'emerging powers', increased cooperation between these powers themselves on the international scene might have major implications for EU foreign policy. The grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) is one of the most established cases of such cooperation. A seemingly divergent group, the BRICS together possess an economic and political clout that is increasingly harder for other global actors to ignore. In its 2008 review of the European Security Strategy (ESS), the EU mentioned all of the BRICS countries as important partners for a multilateral world order.² Scholars too started to pay increasing attention to the BRICS, engaging in a debate around whether the BRICS are emerging not only as economic powers, but also as important political players with a say in the main issues on the international agenda. Their guiding principles of foreign policy give the BRICS a potential to unite around their shared opposition to Western domination, upholding state sovereignty and non-intervention in domestic affairs of other countries. However, such bloc behaviour could predispose them to clash with the foreign policy of the EU, a supranational union of Western countries promoting effective multilateralism and the rule of international law.³

This paper seeks to contribute to the BRICS debate by testing the propositions that the BRICS are developing into a political bloc. At the same time, it will examine how such a development affects the conduct of EU foreign policy, if at all. To that end, the study compares the foreign policy positions of the EU and the BRICS on the Syrian crisis as a topical and multifaceted issue. More precisely, this study is going to explore to what extent the BRICS have a cohesive foreign policy position on the Syrian crisis, and to what degree this challenges the position of the EU on the issue. Thus, the research will begin by analysing how positions of the BRICS relate to each other and what this reveals about their foreign policy coordination as a bloc. The results then will be juxtaposed with the position of the EU to reveal a relationship and the effects on the latter. The working hypothesis put forward is that when their own

¹ T. Renard, "The Treachery of Strategies: A Call for True EU Strategic Partnerships", *Egmont Paper*, no. 45, April 2011, p. III.

² Council of the European Union, *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World*, S407/08, Brussels, 11 December 2008.

³ *Ibid.*

positions align in opposition to the EU, the BRICS challenge the EU's position on Syria because they provide an alternative viewpoint strengthened by their combined political weight. Therefore, when they act as a bloc, they may pose a challenge to the EU's foreign policy. Furthermore, the analysis is expected to show that while the EU and the BRICS have a similar position on non-intervention in Syria, they offer different approaches to tackling the crisis.

The next section will set out the methodological framework and introduce eight indicators for the analysis that are based on the most prominent issues of the crisis. The third section will introduce the conceptual understanding of the BRICS, while the fourth section will give an overview of the relations between the BRICS and the EU as strategic partners. The fifth section will provide the background of the Syrian crisis with important milestones and points of involvement by the EU and the BRICS. The sixth section will present the findings of the analysis based on the eight indicators. Finally, the last section will draw conclusions from the findings and their implications for EU foreign policy and its position in the world with regards to the BRICS.

Methodological approach

The Syrian crisis is chosen as a case study because since 2011 it has been one of the most pressing issues on the global agenda, calling for a response of the whole international community. Both the EU and the BRICS countries responded to the crisis along with other major international players such as the US and the United Nations (UN). The EU has strongly condemned the violence and actions by the Syrian regime from the outset of the conflict.⁴ The EU has been involved in the resolution of the crisis by supporting the UN efforts, recognizing the Syrian opposition, and giving the largest amount of humanitarian aid (2.6 billion euros by early 2014).⁵ The EU has also been one of the participants in the Geneva peace process led by the UN, the US and Russia.

Although not all the BRICS had the same degree of engagement with the issue, as the research will demonstrate further on, they all responded in some way to the crisis as well. Russia has been a key actor as a close ally of the Syrian regime and as one of the main negotiators of the Geneva peace process together with the US.

⁴ European External Action Service, "Fact Sheet - The European Union and Syria", 131018/01, Brussels, 14 March 2014.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reinforced its crucial position. China is also a permanent member of the UNSC, and aligned with Russia by vetoing UNSC resolutions that openly condemned the Syrian regime. Brazil, India and South Africa have also responded to the crisis not least through their membership in the UNSC in 2011 as the crisis unfolded. It has to be noted that all of the BRICS are part of the Geneva peace process as well, putting them to the front of international peace-making efforts. The Syrian regime itself called for the involvement of the BRICS in the resolution of the crisis.⁶ How much cooperation there has been with regard to the positions of the BRICS as a bloc is what this study intends to reveal.

The timeframe of this paper will be from March 2011, when the first anti-government protests erupted in Syria marking the beginning of the current crisis. The start of the crisis almost coincided with the 3rd summit of the BRICS in China when South Africa officially joined the bloc in April 2011. Therefore, the timeframe allows for a coherent representation of the BRICS in their current format.

The research relies upon the method of discourse analysis which will allow analysis and comparison of the responses of the BRICS and the EU through their institutional discourses expressed in official documents. For the purposes of this study, the 'EU position' on the Syrian crisis is to be taken to mean that which is expressed in official statements and documents of EU foreign policy, unilaterally as well as in the framework of the UN. Official documents by the EU include Foreign Affairs Council conclusions, press releases, and statements by the High Representative, President of the Commission and President of the European Council. The response of the BRICS means and is gathered from official statements of member countries' governments and foreign policy representatives, and in the UN. The total number of documents collected for this study is 120. As a possible limitation, it has to be taken into account that these documents are official statements available to the public, and therefore the extent to which they represent actual positions of the actors in question can be limited. To a limited extent, interviews with official representatives of the BRICS and the EU were conducted.

To operationalize and compare the responses, the study checks the stances of the EU and the BRICS against eight indicators that constitute their overall positions related to the crisis. These indicators were chosen from an overview of the Syrian crisis

⁶ D. A. Mahapatra, "Role of BRICS in Syria", *Russia & India Report*, 19 March 2013.

and a preliminary analysis of the actors' discourses in this regard. These indicators were the most prominent issues in discussions of the crisis in the scholarly debate and the media, but also the analysis has shown that the EU and the BRICS used them in explaining their positions on Syria. Support for either the regime of President Assad or the organized Syrian opposition proved a key determinant of an overall position on the crisis. Regarding the principles of non-intervention and national sovereignty, they are often attributed to the foreign policies of the BRICS as explained in the next chapter. This study will examine whether these principles play a role in the BRICS' positions in the context of the Syrian crisis, and whether they are important for the EU. The principles can be potentially connected to proposed solutions to the crisis by actors themselves or reactions to those suggested by others, like the military intervention option deliberated by the US. Silence in the form of omission of an issue in a discourse can be telling as well, especially when compared to an explicit position of other actor(s). The list of eight indicators, grouped under three headings, is as follows:

The actors of the crisis:

1. The regime of Bashar al-Assad
2. The Syrian opposition

Principles of response to the crisis:

3. National sovereignty
4. Non-intervention

Possible solutions to the crisis:

5. Political solution
6. Military intervention
7. Geneva peace process
8. Sanctions on Syria

In addition to the discourse analysis, the paper analyses the voting patterns of the BRICS in the UN on relevant resolutions as indicators of their positions. Within the given timeframe, there were four UNSC resolutions on the topic of the Syrian crisis that were not adopted unanimously, and five United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions.

Based on the indicators, the study first looks at how positions and responses of the BRICS differ or align within the group. The cohesiveness of the positions can thereby be determined according to the degree of alignment, meaning a similar interpretation of an indicator, and a similar position taken in favour or against. Next,

the study analyses the positions of the BRICS in relation to those of the EU following the same logic. For all indicators the analysis takes into account when any of the actors undertook an action to back their positions. Finally, the study identifies the cases when the BRICS have common positions that contradict those of the EU to see the extent to which this challenges the EU's stance.

The discourse analysis method is applied via a grounded theory approach.⁷ Using this qualitative approach makes it possible to establish patterns and linkages emerging from the available data to develop a theory explaining them. The method used in this research can also be applied to other case studies to compare and analyse foreign policy stances of the BRICS and the EU in relation to other international issues.

Conceptual understanding of the BRICS

Ever since a Goldman Sachs report coined the term 'BRIC' for Brazil, Russia, India and China in 2001,⁸ the concept took on a life of its own. From predictions of their growing economic importance in terms of the share of global GDP,⁹ the grouping evolved into a forum for intergovernmental dialogue and a symbol of a non-Western vision of global economic and political governance. In response to the international enthusiasm governments of the BRIC endorsed the 'brand' that was initially created by the US financial firm to develop an investment concept into a framework for cooperation.¹⁰ Ministerial meetings in the BRIC format starting from 2006¹¹ eventually led to annual heads of state summits in every member country.¹² The addition of South Africa to the BRIC in 2011 added to a perceived representativeness of the BRICS by including an African country.¹³

⁷ Research Methods Knowledge Base, "Qualitative Approaches", last updated 20 October 2006.

⁸ G. Tett, "The Story of the Brics", *Financial Times*, 15 January 2010.

⁹ J. O'Neill, Building Better Global Economic BRICs", *Global Economics Paper*, no. 66, London, Goldman Sachs, 2001.

¹⁰ Tett, *op.cit.*

¹¹ S. Keukeleire & H. Bruyninckx, "The European Union, the BRICs and the emerging new world order", in C. Hill & M. Smith (eds.), *International Relations and the European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 2nd edn., p. 384.

¹² A. Lukin, "Russia's Identity Dilemmas: BRICS, the G8 & the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", in F.A. Kornagay & N. Bohler-Muller (eds.), *Laying the BRICS of a New Global Order: From Yekaterinburg 2009 to eThekweni 2013*, Oxford, Africa Institute of South Africa, 2013, p. 89.

¹³ S. Keukeleire *et al.*, *The EU Foreign Policy towards the BRICs and other Emerging Powers: Objectives and Strategies*, Brussels, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, Policy Department, October 2011, p. 5.

Despite this intensified cooperation, the BRICS remains an informal grouping with no permanent organizational structure, no founding documents, and no permanent operating bodies or staff.¹⁴ The main strength of the BRICS comes from their combined economic weight. Together they contributed 27 percent of global growth between 2000 and 2007,¹⁵ and increased their share of global GDP (in purchasing power parity) from 16 to 25 percent between 2000 and 2010.¹⁶

The BRICS is a grouping united by political will instead of a binding agreement or a formal framework. Their approach so far has been to foster network cooperation with non-binding arrangements and common strategies. This gives them the advantage of flexibility whilst avoiding concentrating on their divergences, which would hinder the process and result in inertia.¹⁷ Evidence from Russian diplomacy confirms this view of the BRICS as “one of the flexible mechanisms that can be used when the BRICS have something to say and share a common position”.¹⁸ The BRICS can be perceived as a “political club” more than a bloc,¹⁹ providing participating countries with an informal cooperation umbrella that gives them a combined political weight.

Nevertheless, the main limitation of the potential influence of the BRICS remains the fact that all members have fundamental differences.²⁰ Critics point to an unequal distribution of economic weight in the group as one of their main weaknesses.²¹ The BRICS have further stark differences in population numbers,²² political systems,²³ and military capabilities.²⁴ In terms of international influence, China and Russia stand out from the BRICS by holding permanent seats in the UNSC.²⁵ As a consequence, not all observers share the same view on the importance and influence of the BRICS.

¹⁴ Lukin, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁵ T. Renard, “A Multipolar World in the Making”, in T. Renard & S. Biscop (eds.), *The EU and Emerging Powers in the 21st Century*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, p. 49.

¹⁶ Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *The BRICS Report: A Study of Brazil, India, China, and South Africa With Special Focus on Synergies and Complementarities*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. ix.

¹⁷ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Interview with O. Zykova, Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, Brussels, 5 March 2014.

¹⁹ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ Keukeleire & Bruyninckx, *op.cit.*, p. 384.

²¹ H.V. Pant, “The BRICS Fallacy”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, p. 97.

²² Renard, “A Multipolar World in the Making”, *op.cit.*, pp. 47-49.

²³ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

²⁴ Renard, “A Multipolar World in the Making”, *op.cit.*, pp. 52-53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

On a political level, there have been several cases when the BRICS did not demonstrate a united stance to prove themselves as a bloc, such as on the candidacy of the World Bank's new president in 2012.²⁶ On the reform of the UNSC, Russia and China reiterated their support for India, Brazil and South Africa, but neither Russia nor China took any concrete actions as permanent members themselves.²⁷ Previous analysis of the BRICS voting patterns in the UN framework also points to a lack of coherence of the bloc.²⁸ This has led scholars to conclude that the "many disparities and policy differences mean that there is little prospect of the BRICS developing into a coherent body in terms of political, security or economic issues".²⁹

One of the founding ideas that unite the BRICS countries despite their major differences is a shared belief in their "emergence".³⁰ That is, they all have claims for bigger international influence from where they find themselves now. The BRICS are usually described as "emerging powers", although this concept itself is not well-defined and is often linked to notions of "emerging economies" or "emerging markets".³¹

The BRICS complement their emerging power status by several principles of conducting international relations. In coming together under the BRICS format they share a stance against the domination of world affairs and the main international institutions by the Western countries.³² In their first summit declaration of 2009, the leaders of the BRIC declared their support for "a more democratic and just multipolar world order".³³ They also emphasized the reform of international financial institutions where emerging and developing economies should be better represented.³⁴ Thus, the BRICS advocate for a reform of global governance, where the US no longer is a dominant power in a contemporary international system. Instead, in a multipolar system there should be "a number of states wielding substantial power" or "a number of 'great powers'".³⁵

²⁶ M. Emerson, "Do the BRICS Make a Bloc?", *CEPS Commentary*, 30 April 2012, p. 3.

²⁷ Pant, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

²⁸ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

²⁹ F. Cameron, "The EU and the BRICs", *Policy Paper 3*, February 2011, p. 5.

³⁰ Renard, "A Multipolar World in the Making", *op.cit.*, p. 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³² T. Deich, "BRICS: A New Actor in Global Security", *Russian International Affairs Council*, 9 December 2013.

³³ BRICS Information Centre, "Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders: Yekaterinburg, Russia", 16 June 2009.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ A. R. Young, "Perspectives on the Changing Global Distribution of Power: Concepts and Context", *Politics*, vol. 30, 2010, p. 3.

In their opposition to the West on a global scene, the BRICS also emphasize the protection of national sovereignty and non-intervention as core principles.³⁶ Not only do they guard their own sovereignty, but they also oppose interference in internal affairs of other states even if the prevailing international consensus favours it as in the case of the Western intervention in Libya in 2011.³⁷ In addition, on the international level, the BRICS prefer an intergovernmental approach with voluntary commitments as opposed to powerful international regimes and legally binding obligations.³⁸ Apart from this definition of principles common to the BRICS, there is no one theory or theoretical approach developed in the literature for analysis of the BRICS. Rather, the grouping is analysed through lenses of the global political economy and theories of international relations³⁹ or foreign policy.⁴⁰ Whether from a realist, an institutionalist or a constructivist perspective, scholars agree that the emergence of the BRICS represents a shift in the global balance of power.⁴¹

The multipolar world order might not be here yet, and the BRICS might not necessarily change the existing “rules of the game” of international politics,⁴² but trends point to a relative decline of the American and European centres of power in favour of the emerging powers.⁴³ Against this backdrop, the next section explores the extent to which the changing power balance is reflected in the relations between the EU and the BRICS.

EU-BRICS Relations

Cooperation with the BRICS is not only difficult to grasp conceptually, as the previous section has demonstrated, but the bloc is also hard to fit into existing EU foreign policy approaches. Currently, there is no unitary framework for the cooperation with the BRICS by the EU since it does not recognize them as a group.⁴⁴ One of the prevailing approaches in the literature is to analyse the relations of the EU with the

³⁶ S. Keukeleire & T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Palgrave Mcmillan, 2014, 2nd edn., pp 292-293.

³⁷ Pant, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

³⁸ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

³⁹ F. Beausang, *Globalization and the BRICs: Why the BRICs Will Not Rule the World for Long*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 69-71.

⁴⁰ A. Hurrell, “Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order: What Space for Would-be Great Powers?”, *International Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 1-19.

⁴¹ Young, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴³ Renard, “A Multipolar World in the Making”, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Cameron, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

BRICS from the perspective of EU strategic partnerships⁴⁵ which the EU has concluded with all of the BRICS.⁴⁶ As stated by the Lisbon Treaty and the European Security Strategy, the EU should promote its principles and interests through strategic partnerships.⁴⁷ They comprise a set of bilateral frameworks and agreements concluded between the EU and a third country, annual summits, ministerial meetings and intergovernmental dialogues.⁴⁸

Although seemingly creating a common framework, in reality these strategic partnerships are very heterogeneous in terms of the nature of partners, scope and type.⁴⁹ Moreover, the concept of strategic partnerships has never been defined by the EU.⁵⁰ The analysis of the existing partnerships leads to several conclusions: First, the EU has failed to develop a clear strategic vision towards the BRICS, even if the strategic partnerships were declared as “[goals] to be pursued” rather than as a reflection of the current state of relations.⁵¹ Secondly, the adoption of a strategic partnership so far has not led to tangible results in terms of closer relations with the BRICS, alignment of positions on global issues or substantial cooperation.⁵² In general, it is recognized that strategic partnerships are more declaratory acts by the EU, which contrast strongly with the actual state of relations with the BRICS.⁵³

In that light, it comes as no surprise that there is little evidence of convergence with positions of the BRICS on general objectives of EU external action and on global challenges defined by the ESS.⁵⁴ For example, there was a lack of support for the EU from China, India, South Africa and Brazil on climate change as demonstrated by the Copenhagen summit in 2009.⁵⁵ There is little cooperation

⁴⁵ See S. Keukeleire & H. Bruyninckx, “The European Union, the BRICs and the emerging new world order”, in C. Hill & M. Smith (eds.), *International Relations and the European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 2nd edn., pp. 380-403; A. Sautenet, “The EU’s Strategic Partnerships With Emerging Powers: Institutional, Legal, Economic and Political Perspectives”, in T. Renard & S. Biscop (eds.), *The EU and Emerging Powers in the 21st Century*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 123-146; G. Grevi & Á. De Vasconcelos (eds.), *Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia*, Paris, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2008.

⁴⁶ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Sautenet, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ C.-C. Cirlig, “EU Strategic Partnerships With Third Countries”, *Library Briefing – Library of the European Parliament*, 26 September 2012, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁹ Sautenet, *op.cit.*, pp. 124-139.

⁵⁰ Renard, “The Treachery of Strategies: A Call for True EU Strategic Partnerships”, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Keukeleire & Delreux, *op.cit.*, p. 291.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Keukeleire & Bruyninckx, *op.cit.*, p. 389.

⁵⁴ Sautenet, *op.cit.*, pp. 133-139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

between the EU and the BRICS on security issues as well, such as the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and counter-terrorism.⁵⁶ Furthermore, while the EU promotes a doctrine of effective multilateralism in its global action, the EU was not able to secure the support of the BRICs in the UN framework.⁵⁷ Overall, the strategic partnerships appear to be insufficient to foster a shared understanding between the EU and the BRICS on international strategic issues and priorities of the EU.

Besides the strategic partnerships, the EU has not developed a strategy to approach the BRICS, and has no strategic and policy approach towards the shifting balance of power that the BRICS represent.⁵⁸ Existing research indicates that even if the BRICS do not act as a coherent political bloc,⁵⁹ they still can pose strategic challenges for the EU.⁶⁰ In that context, the Syrian crisis is a relevant case study because it has been a high-profile issue and a major challenge for all global actors. As explained in the methodology section, both the EU and the BRICS were involved in the international response to the crisis, allowing for a comparison of their positions. Furthermore, the BRICS' positions on the Syrian crisis have not been studied in detail in the academic literature. It has been argued that the BRICS did not come up with any substantial proposals on tackling the crisis and offered "banalities" instead.⁶¹ The study tests those claims by scrutinizing the discourses of the BRICS before comparing them to the EU discourse. The Syrian case offers the possibility to identify underlying patterns in the positions of the BRICS and explore the consequences for EU foreign policy. The next section will proceed with an overview of the crisis which is necessary for understanding the context that informed the actors' positions.

The development of the Syrian crisis

The crisis in Syria, which started with pro-democracy protests inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings, evolved into a full-blown civil war between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and opposition forces. Despite over four years of internal fighting, a worsening humanitarian situation, and efforts by the international community to find a solution, the crisis is nowhere near a resolution. According to UN estimates, over 220 thousand people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, more than

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Keukeleire & Bruyninckx, *op.cit.*, pp. 385, 401.

⁵⁹ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Emerson, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Pant, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

half of the country's population had to flee their homes,⁶² and 12.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria.⁶³ This section outlines the main developments of the crisis, with a focus on relevant events for the analysis. The positions of the EU and the BRICS will then be discussed in detail in the section on the findings below.

The crisis has its origins in anti-government protests that erupted in the city of Deraa in March 2011, inspired by the popular uprisings in the Arab world.⁶⁴ In Syria, the highly oppressive authoritarian regime of Assad's family with one of the worst human rights records in the world has ruled for over forty years.⁶⁵ The government responded to the protests by using force against demonstrators.⁶⁶ The crackdown sparked even more protests across the whole country and demands for the President to resign.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the regime stepped up violent repressions of protest actions by deploying military troops, tanks, and carrying out mass arrest campaigns of activists, with the death toll rising to several hundred civilians.⁶⁸

The escalating crisis prompted the US and the EU to impose sanctions targeting President Assad and senior Syrian officials.⁶⁹ In the UNSC, the UK, France, Germany and Portugal proposed the first draft resolution on the situation in Syria in May 2011, but it was never put to vote due to opposition from some members, including the BRICS.⁷⁰ International pressure on Damascus further increased in August 2011, when the US and the EU together with the leaders of the UK, France and Germany urged President Assad to resign in the light of the escalation of the conflict between the government forces and protesters.⁷¹

The opposition, which started from ordinary Syrians and an online movement, organized itself into the Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011.⁷² This Council was the first attempt to create a unified body representative of an internal and

⁶² "UN Chief Stresses Collective Responsibility to Resolve Syria Conflict, End Nightmare For Millions", *UN News Centre*, 12 March 2015.

⁶³ European Commission, *ECHO Factsheet – Syria crisis*, 6 March 2011,

⁶⁴ "Syria Profile", *BBC*, 19 March 2014.

⁶⁵ "Syria: Origins of the Uprising", *BBC*, 8 June 2012.

⁶⁶ "Syria, the Story of the Conflict", *BBC*, 14 March 2014.

⁶⁷ "Syria: Origins of the Uprising", *op.cit.*

⁶⁸ "Events in Syria: A Chronology", *International New York Times*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ J. Solomon, N. Malas & L. Norman, "World Leaders Urge Assad to Resign", *Wall Street Journal*, 19 August 2011.

⁷² "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*

exiled opposition, with the goal of gaining international recognition.⁷³ The objectives of the SNC included advocating a peaceful resolution of the conflict through diplomatic and political efforts, and overseeing a democratic transition.⁷⁴ Another part of the Syrian opposition was in favour of a more active military approach to overthrow Assad on the ground, and formed itself into the Free Syrian Army.⁷⁵

In the same month the UNSC voted for the first time on a draft resolution on Syria (S/2011/612) sponsored by France, the UK, Germany and Portugal.⁷⁶ The resolution strongly condemned the violence by the Syrian authorities, and demanded that they stop using the force against civilians, with 30 days for compliance.⁷⁷ Although the text of the resolution was substantially altered in several rounds of negotiations, China and Russia used their power of veto.⁷⁸

In February 2012, the Syrian army started using artillery in the city of Homs over a period of several weeks.⁷⁹ In the same month, the UN and the Arab League joined their efforts by appointing Kofi Annan as the Joint Special Envoy for Syria. The Arab League and the UNSC unanimously endorsed his peace plan for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict in March 2012.⁸⁰ When Syria agreed to the plan as well, in April the UNSC approved a resolution to allow UN observers into Syria to monitor the negotiated ceasefire.⁸¹ Another initiative by Annan was to convene the Action Group for Syria in Geneva, consisting of the permanent members of the UNSC, the UN and Arab League Secretaries-General, the EU, Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar.⁸² In that conference, later referred to as 'Geneva I', the Group produced the Geneva Communiqué that called for a cessation of the armed violence, outlined the terms of political settlement and transition in Syria and expressed its support for the implementation of Annan's plan.⁸³

However, in the end Annan's negotiation efforts were unsuccessful as the Syrian regime failed to comply with terms of negotiated agreements and the

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, "The Syrian National Coalition: Motivations for its Formation and Building Blocks of Success", 11 December 2012.

⁷⁴ D.W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 167-168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁷⁶ Security Council Report, "Chronology of Events - Syria", revised on 7 May 2015.

⁷⁷ United Nations Security Council, Draft Resolution S/2011/612, 4 October 2011.

⁷⁸ Security Council Report, "Chronology of Events - Syria", *op.cit.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*; Lesch, *op.cit.*, pp. 227-228.

⁸¹ Lesch, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

⁸² Action Group for Syria, *Final Communiqué*, 30 June 2012.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

ceasefire.⁸⁴ Annan resigned in August 2012 and was succeeded by new Joint Arab League-United Nations Special Representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi.⁸⁵ In the same month the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/66/253) demanding the resignation of President Assad.⁸⁶ The US President stated that the use of chemical weapons against opposition forces would constitute a "red line" for the US, and issued a warning that such a move could provoke a military retaliation against the Syrian regime.⁸⁷

In the meantime, the SNC became increasingly discredited internally and abroad for its internal divisions and inefficiency in representing the opposition.⁸⁸ In November 2012, the SNC reformed itself to become the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (also referred to as the Syrian National Coalition).⁸⁹ The new Coalition was welcomed internationally and partly by Syrian opposition groups, and was recognized by over 100 countries as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁹⁰

In 2013 the conflict continued with unconfirmed reports on the use of chemical weapons by government forces.⁹¹ In an unexpected turn in March 2013, it was revealed to the media that the senior advisor to President Assad communicated a letter to the President of South Africa, chairman of the upcoming BRICS summit in Durban, with an appeal to the BRICS.⁹² In the letter, President Assad directly asked for an involvement of the BRICS "to stop violence in his country and encourage the opening of a dialogue, which he wishes to start".⁹³ In the same month the EU discussed lifting its arms embargo on Syria, and in May 2013 the EU leaders agreed not to renew it.⁹⁴

In a turning point of the crisis in August 2013, suspected attacks with chemical weapons took place in the suburbs of Damascus, killing hundreds of

⁸⁴ "Timeline of Syria's Raging War", *Aljazeera*, 9 August 2014.

⁸⁵ Security Council Report, "Chronology of Events - Syria", *op.cit.*

⁸⁶ "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*

⁸⁷ P. Eckert, "Timeline: Turning Points in the US Debate on Syria", *Reuters*, 31 August 2013.

⁸⁸ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces".

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*

⁹² D.A. Mahapatra, "Role of BRICS in Syria", *Russia & India Report*, 19 March 2013.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*

people, for which both sides of the conflict blamed each other.⁹⁵ The attacks urged US, British and French leaders to call for military action against the Syrian regime.⁹⁶ UN weapons inspectors concluded that it was the nerve gas *Sarin* that killed about 300 people in the incident, but the inspectors did not identify those responsible.⁹⁷ The US and Russia then elaborated a plan for the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons.⁹⁸ The unanimously adopted UNSC resolution reinforced the plan that required a verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles.⁹⁹ The resolution also called for convening a conference to implement the Geneva Communiqué from June 2012, and expressed its support for the establishment of a transitional government in Syria.¹⁰⁰

The 'Geneva II' conference on 22 January 2014 brought together not only representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition, but also permanent members of the UNSC, the Secretary General of the Arab League, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and 25 observer countries including Brazil, India, and South Africa.¹⁰¹ Due to the polarized positions of the two main delegations, the conference failed to produce substantial proposals on how to mitigate the crisis and proceed with further negotiations. While the delegation of the Syrian government insisted on focusing the talks on combatting "terrorism", the opposition wanted to discuss the terms of transition.¹⁰²

The inability to break the stalemate in the Geneva peace process led to Brahimi's resignation as Joint Arab League-UN Joint Special Representative for Syria in May 2014.¹⁰³ Staffan de Mistura succeeded him in July 2014.¹⁰⁴ The UN response to the crisis in 2014 also included six UNSC resolutions (adopted unanimously) focusing on humanitarian aid access in Syria, and addressing a growing threat from terrorist groups such as the Islamic State.¹⁰⁵ The Syrian regime affirmed its grip on power in June 2014 when Bashar al-Assad won the first presidential elections in decades with

⁹⁵ "Syria, the Story of the Conflict", *op.cit.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; "Syria Profile", *op.cit.*

⁹⁸ Security Council Report, "Chronology of Events - Syria", *op.cit.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ United Nations, "Transcript of Press Conference by Joint Special Representative for Syria (JSRS) Lakhdar Brahimi", 20 December 2013.

¹⁰² L. Scazzieri & S. Blockmans, "Shaping the Emerging Consensus on Syria", *CEPS Commentary*, 26 February 2014, p. 2.

¹⁰³ Security Council Report, "Chronology of Events - Syria", *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Security Council Report, "UN Documents for Syria: Security Council Resolutions".

88.7 percent of the vote.¹⁰⁶ The Syrian opposition and its international supporters, including the US and the EU, condemned the poll as illegitimate. With no clear military advantage on either side of the conflict and no effective diplomatic solution,¹⁰⁷ the Syrian crisis continues to evolve with no prospect of a resolution in sight.

The crisis proved to be difficult for the international community to deal with not only due to its scale, but also because of the controversial and politically sensitive issues involved. In spite of a consensus on the desirability of a negotiated and peaceful resolution of the crisis, there was no agreement on the role of the current regime and the terms of an armistice. Constant evolution of the crisis from what was expected to be a peaceful democratic transition to a civil war between the repressive regime and a fragmented opposition, required all international actors including the BRICS and the EU to refine their positions. In order to understand those positions the study will now move to a detailed analysis of the EU and the BRICS positions based on the eight indicators introduced above.

Findings of the analysis

This section will present what the discourse on each indicator revealed about the BRICS' coherence and how it related to the position of the EU.

The actors of the crisis

1. The regime of Bashar al-Assad

On support of President Assad and his regime, the data analysis has shown a wide range of positions from a tacit support by Russia to an outright condemnation by the EU. The BRICS as a whole did not display any degree of coherence in this regard. Russia confirmed its position as the closest to the regime politically from the BRICS. In its discourse, Russia showed reluctance in condemning the Syrian regime and vetoed resolutions that would have had such an effect. Although the Russian representative stated that "We're not advocates of the Assad regime"¹⁰⁸ in a comment on the first draft resolution on Syria that Russia vetoed together with China, the statement also indicated that Russia "could not agree with the accusatory tone

¹⁰⁶ "Assad Re-elected in Wartime Election", *Aljazeera*, 5 June 2014,

¹⁰⁷ Scazzieri & Blockmans, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁸ United Nations Department of Public Information, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria's Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto By Russian Federation, China", 4 October 2011.

against Damascus".¹⁰⁹ The Russian side repeatedly stressed that President Assad and his regime enjoyed the support of the Syrian population and that removal of the regime would only exacerbate the crisis.

However, the other four BRICS countries do not mention Assad's name in their discourses. It appears that the rest of the BRICS prefer not to take clear stances in relation to the regime itself. Apart from voting against resolutions that condemned the use of violence by the Syrian authorities, China in its official discourse does not indicate a clear position towards Assad and his regime. As expressed in one statement, "China is not biased to any one party in Syria, including the Syrian government".¹¹⁰ But the Chinese discourse highlights strongly that "China opposed any act aimed at forcing a regime change",¹¹¹ which serves as a sign that for China the preservation of the Syrian regime is more a question of principle than a support for Assad's regime in particular.

Further away from backing the Syrian regime is Brazil, which does not point to Assad, but regularly indicates that the Syrian government bears "primary responsibility" for the "cessation of violence"¹¹² and the "protection of civilians".¹¹³ South Africa echoes the same reasoning, but states that the opposition bears responsibility for the violence as well.¹¹⁴ As another implicit indication of the attitude towards Assad's regime, India, China, Russia, and South Africa in their statements welcome reforms introduced by the Syrian government in 2011. India, in particular, states that "the international community should give time and space" for the implementation of the reforms introduced by the Syrian government.¹¹⁵ Thus the positions of the BRICS without Russia are not unanimous in relation to this indicator.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, "Explanation of Vote by Chinese delegation on the Draft Resolution of the Special Session of Human Rights Council on Syria", 1 June 2012.

¹¹¹ Department of Public Information, "General Assembly, In Resolution, Demands All in Syria 'Immediately and Visibly' Commit to Ending Violence That Secretary-General Says is Ripping Country Apart", 3 August 2012.

¹¹² Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Regina Maria Cordeiro Dunlop, Deputy Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations - Situation in the Middle East, Including the Question of Palestine", 23 January 2013.

¹¹³ Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Regina Maria Cordeiro Dunlop, Deputy Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations - Situation in the Middle East, Including the Question of Palestine", 24 April 2013.

¹¹⁴ The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "South Africa expresses concern over the human rights situation in Syria", 29 May 2013.

¹¹⁵ Government of India – Ministry of External Affairs, "Explanation of Vote delivered by Ambassador Hardeep Puri on draft Resolution on Syria at UNSC on 4 October 2011", 4 October 2011.

One possible explanation is that for them, expressing support for Assad might have “heavy political costs” internationally with “nothing to gain” in return.¹¹⁶

In contrast, the position of the EU was much more explicit in putting the responsibility on the regime for the violent repression and atrocities against civilians. The EU had even called for the resignation of Assad. As expressed by the EU High Representative, “Assad has no place in the future of Syria”.¹¹⁷ To reinforce its position on pressuring the regime, the EU cut bilateral ties with Syria and imposed restrictive measures on the country's economy and people associated with atrocities.¹¹⁸

Hence, the EU's position is distinct from that of the BRICS on support for Assad and his regime. Since the BRICS themselves do not have cohesive positions on this question, it is doubtful that they can challenge the stance of the EU. Only the Russian position is clear and consciously advocated, but without the same level of support from the rest of the BRICS it remains the position of just one actor.

2. The Syrian opposition

To begin with, a preliminary overview of the discourse data did not allow for the selection of a specific opposition actor that would permit a comparative analysis across the discourses of the BRICS and the EU. Most of the discourses did not contain references to individual actors of the Syrian opposition such as the Syrian National Council, the Syrian National Coalition, the Free Syrian Army or others.

Even towards the Syrian opposition in general, the BRICS discourses do not contain a coherent position. On the contrary, there is a divide between the positions expressed towards the opposition by Russia and the rest of the BRICS. In particular, the latter prefer not to specify whom they regard as “opposition” in general. The statement of Brazil, for example, reads: “We urge the opposition to remain actively committed to the plan”,¹¹⁹ while India calls “on all opposition forces in Syria to peacefully engage in constructive dialogue with the authorities”.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Interview with an official, European External Action Service, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁷ European Commission, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁸ European External Action Service, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁹ Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, “Statement by H.E. Ambassador Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations - Informal Meeting of the General Assembly on the Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic”, 7 June 2012.

¹²⁰ Government of India – Ministry of External Affairs, “Statement by Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, PR of India to UN, in Explanation of Vote on the UNGA Resolution on Syria”, 16 February 2012.

On the other hand, Russia is more willing to indicate separate groups within the Syrian opposition, and Russia displays a negative stance towards most of them. As one statement of Russia on the draft UNGA resolution puts forward: "it is unacceptable that the text awkwardly protrudes the so-called [Syrian National Coalition] as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people".¹²¹ Other opposition groups that Russia refers to include Jabhat Al-Nusra, one of the rebel groups that Russia considers to be terrorists, the Free Syrian Army and the National Coordination Committee. Overall, in its discourse Russia is very critical of the Syrian opposition in general for being extremist, responsible for atrocities and not legitimate.

One pattern that unites Russia with the rest of the BRICS, but not China, is that the opposition consists of armed opposition groups who bear responsibility for violence and use of force. Otherwise, with the exception of Russia, in their discourses the BRICS do not take a definite position in relation to the Syrian opposition. Probably due to the absence of consensus among the members on this issue beyond such declarations, there is no indication for a position of the BRICS on support for any Syrian opposition in the BRICS common statements or documents either.

As for the EU, it took a more elaborate position towards the Syrian opposition represented by the Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Coalition. The EU welcomed the formation of a unified opposition throughout the crisis and engaged with it through dialogues and consultations. The most apparent evidence of its support to the Syrian National Coalition was its recognition by the EU as "legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people".¹²² Thus, the position of the EU is the opposite of the Russian one, which does not recognize the Syrian National Coalition.

The lack of a common and unambiguous position does not pre-dispose the BRICS to challenge the EU position in support of the organized Syrian opposition. The EU position contradicts that of Russia, but the BRICS as a group do not offer their backing in this.

¹²¹ Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, "Statement by Mr. Alexander A. Pankin, Charge d'affaires of the Russian Federation to the United Nations on Agenda Item 33 for the 67th Session of the General Assembly on 'Prevention of armed conflict'", 15 May 2013.

¹²² Council of the European Union, Press Release of the 3199th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, 19 November 2012.

Principles of response to the crisis

3. National sovereignty

The analysis of the BRICS discourses reveals that they all regard this principle to be key in dealing with the crisis. All five countries emphasize respect and preservation of the Syrian national sovereignty as important for a political solution. According to a Russian diplomat, adherence to this principle in foreign policy is a uniting point for the BRICS.¹²³ References in their common statements reinforce the BRICS' commitment. In particular, the declarations of the New Delhi, Durban and Fortaleza summits, as well as a joint communiqué of the deputy foreign ministers' meeting in 2011, reiterate the importance of the national sovereignty principle in resolving the Syrian crisis.

In their discourses, the BRICS do not specifically define 'sovereignty', but some common interpretations appear. Russia and China, in particular, display a similar vision connected to national sovereignty, which is the "right of [Syrian] people to freely choose their political system",¹²⁴ or a "right of [Syrian] people to decide for themselves".¹²⁵ South Africa shares the same vision, stating that "it is important that the Syrian people be allowed to decide their own fate, including their future leadership".¹²⁶ China also places specific emphasis on the universality of respect for a country's sovereignty as part of the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the norms of international relations.¹²⁷

One important factor concerning this principle is that it was written in the text of the Geneva Communiqué. Therefore, it is easier for the BRICS to endorse this principle in their positions afterwards. In fact, some of the official documents follow the exact same wording as the Communiqué – "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria".¹²⁸

The EU also highlights preserving the sovereignty of Syria. Yet, this phrase appears in the EU discourse only after the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué on

¹²³ Interview with O. Zykova, *op.cit.*

¹²⁴ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, "Statement by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin during the Interactive Dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry on the situation in Syria at the 21st Session of the Human Rights Council", 17 September 2012.

¹²⁵ Interview with O. Zykova, *op.cit.*

¹²⁶ The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "South Africa's stance regarding UN Security Council Vote on Syria", 6 February 2012.

¹²⁷ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, "Statement by Ambassador He Yafei at the Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the Human Rights Situation in Syria", 22 August 2011.

¹²⁸ Action Group for Syria, *Final Communiqué*, *op.cit.*

30 June 2012, while in the BRICS discourses it is present much earlier (with the exception of Brazil). It could therefore be argued that the EU adopted this principle in its discourse as a result of the Communiqué. The principle was included in the Communiqué that was endorsed by all of the BRICS and the EU (as will be demonstrated further in the analysis) suggesting that there is no direct contradiction between the positions of the EU and the BRICS on this point. However, the particular attention devoted to the sovereignty principle by the BRICS in their declarations shows a discrepancy with the EU. If the BRICS perceive it as one of their common guiding principles for the conduct of international relations, this might challenge EU foreign policy.

4. Non-intervention

The principle of non-intervention is often associated with the BRICS foreign policy, but there is actually a lack of uniform position among the BRICS. Only Russia, South Africa and China emphasize non-intervention or non-interference interchangeably in their discourses. These three actors see non-intervention as a rejection of an outside interference in internal affairs of a state.¹²⁹ India's and Brazil's stances towards this principle in relation to the Syrian crisis remain thus unclear. When used in the discourse of Russia, South Africa and China, this principle appears to be closely related to national sovereignty and the opposition of the BRICS to military intervention in Syria.¹³⁰

Some of their statements are also very straightforward in expressing their national views on non-interference. For South Africa, "no foreign or external parties should interfere in Syria".¹³¹ The Russian view is even more explicit in indicating that

¹²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China, "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meeting Chinese and Foreign Journalists on the Margins of the Geneva II Conference On Syria in Montreux, Switzerland", 23 January 2014; The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "South African response to the use of chemical weapons in Damascus", 29 August 2013; United Nations Department of Public Information, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria's Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto By Russian Federation, China", *op.cit.*

¹³⁰ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, "Statement by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin during the Interactive Dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry on the situation in Syria at the 21st Session of the Human Rights Council", *op.cit.*; The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "Minister Nkoana-Mashabane to take part in the International High-Level Meeting on Syria", 21 January 2014; United Nations Department of Public Information, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria's Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto By Russian Federation, China", *op.cit.*

¹³¹ The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "South Africa's stance regarding UN Security Council Vote on Syria", *op.cit.*

“[Russia's] partners on the West are eager to shape reality for Syrian people, [...] and they actively meddle in [...] who will lead Syria in the future.”¹³² In its turn, the Chinese six-point proposal for a political settlement stipulates that “[China opposes] anyone interfering in Syria's internal affairs under the pretext of ‘humanitarian’ issues.”¹³³

It has to be noted that unlike the principle of sovereignty, non-intervention is not part of the principles outlined in the Geneva Communiqué, so neither the BRICS nor the EU could rely on it in their positions. In that context, the principle of non-intervention does not seem to be significant enough for the EU to insert it in its foreign policy statements since it does not refer to this notion in its entire discourse. While it may not mean that the principle itself is irrelevant for the EU, but in comparison to the statements cited above the difference is apparent. Yet, given the fact that India and Brazil did not express their attitude towards non-intervention principle in their discourse either, the BRICS position cannot be taken as uniform to have any effect as a bloc position. Russia, China and South Africa might promote this principle potentially exposing a difference with the EU, but that also does not favour cohesion with the rest of the BRICS.

Possible solutions to the crisis

5. Political solution

A political solution is the most common answer offered in response to the Syrian crisis by both the BRICS and the EU. Under different wordings – political process, political dialogue, political transition, and political settlement – this concept appears as a standard declaration in the discourses of the BRICS. Since all of the BRICS agree on this indicator, it comes as no surprise that reference to a political solution is transferred to the BRICS formal statements as well. The Delhi summit declaration states that facilitation of a Syrian-led political process is an objective of the BRICS countries,¹³⁴ and the eThekweni declaration emphasizes that such a process can be achieved only through a broad national dialogue.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, the concept is plagued with ambiguity because the BRICS discourses contain few details and innovative proposals on how to bring about such

¹³² Interview with O. Zykova, *op.cit.*

¹³³ “China raises 6-point statement for resolving Syria issue”, *op.cit.*

¹³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, “Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration, New Delhi, March 29, 2012”, *BRICS Information Centre*.

¹³⁵ Official website of the 2013 BRICS Durban Summit, “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialization – eTwekweni Declaration”, *BRICS Information Centre*.

a political solution in Syria, even if one could expect such ambiguity on the level of general statements and summit declarations. China was the only one who actually came up with a six-point proposal for a political settlement of the crisis in March 2012.¹³⁶ The proposal included points largely similar to the Annan plan, including a ceasefire and a political dialogue between the parties.¹³⁷ As the Geneva peace process gradually came about, its conditions became a synonym for the political solution endorsed by the BRICS.

Not only the BRICS, but also the EU agree that a political solution as embodied by the Geneva peace process is the best way to resolve the crisis. For the EU, a political solution is one of the priorities in response to the crisis,¹³⁸ which is reflected in the official discourse as well. Unlike the discourses of the BRICS, the EU statements contain more preconditions that the EU sees as necessary for a political solution. Some of those preconditions include a united action by the UNSC to put pressure on the regime, a strong and united Syrian opposition, an isolation of the regime through the imposition of sanctions and the engagement with diplomatic efforts of the UN.¹³⁹

A consensus of the EU and the BRICS was not very difficult to achieve since the formal support for a political solution can serve as a lowest common denominator for all actors. Expressing support for a political solution of such a grave crisis is a convenient position since it does not require a purposeful action and an active position. Before the Geneva Communiqué, the BRICS do not clarify what exactly they mean by a political solution, and thus avoid taking a more concrete position. Hence, a formal cohesion of the BRICS and the EU on a political solution does not carry a lot of significance as it is an easy point for convergence.

6. Military intervention

All of the BRICS countries are firmly opposed to a "military solution" to the crisis, especially in the form of an outside intervention or "interference". It has to be clarified that the discourses differentiate between a "military solution" that refers to

¹³⁶ "China raises 6-point statement for resolving Syria issue", *China.org.cn*, 4 March 2012.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ C. Berger, Director for North Africa, Middle East, Arabian Peninsula, Iran and Iraq in the European External Action Service, "The EU and the transition in the Arab World", lecture, College of Europe, Bruges, 2 April 2014.

¹³⁹ European Commission, Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission, *Speech on the Latest Developments in the Middle East & Syria*, A 268/12, 12 June 2012.

an armed struggle between the Syrian regime and the opposition resulting in a victory of one side and a foreign military action. The BRICS discourses show a clear position against both possibilities and display unity in this regard. The BRICS uphold opposition to a military solution to the crisis as a bloc in three cases. The first one is a joint statement of the meeting of BRICS foreign ministers on the margins of the UNGA,¹⁴⁰ and the others are the eThekweni declaration where the BRICS oppose “any further militarization of the conflict”,¹⁴¹ and the Fortaleza summit declaration.¹⁴² Rejections of a military intervention are more categorical in discourses of individual actors. According to an Indian position, “there should be no outside military intervention [in Syria]”,¹⁴³ while South Africa warns that “any foreign involvement or military action in Syria will have disastrous consequences”.¹⁴⁴

As a justification for their positions, some of the BRICS' statements include suggested negative consequences of a military intervention, such as an intensification of the conflict and a destabilization of the wider region.¹⁴⁵ The BRICS further connect military intervention from outside to a forceful regime change, which is unacceptable for India, Russia, China and South Africa. As for Brazil, its discourse does not contain a clear position towards an outside military intervention, which can be related to an unwillingness of the Brazilian government to face the implications of taking such potentially controversial position.¹⁴⁶ What can be seen as a rationale that informed the Brazilian position is a concept of “responsibility while protecting”.¹⁴⁷ The Brazilian government officially developed this concept and presented it in 2011 for circulation in the UNSC and the UNGA. The main idea of the document was that because the concept of the “responsibility to protect” can be misused for non-humanitarian purposes, including regime change, the international community

¹⁴⁰ Official website of the 2013 BRICS Durban Summit, “Media Note on the Meeting of BRICS Foreign Ministers on the Margins of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, *BRICS Information Centre*, 26 September 2013.

¹⁴¹ *BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation - eThekweni Declaration*, Durban, 27 March 2013.

¹⁴² “Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan”, *VI BRICS Summit*, July 2014.

¹⁴³ Government of India – Ministry of External Affairs, “Address by Minister of State for External Affairs Shri E. Ahamed at High-level International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria”, 30 January 2013.

¹⁴⁴ The Department of International Relations and Cooperation, “Syrian Conflict: Condemnation of Israeli air attack on targets in Syria”, 7 May 2013.

¹⁴⁵ “Address by H.E. Mr. Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation at the UN Security Council debate ‘Situation in the Middle East: Challenges and Opportunities’”, 12 March 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with an EU official, via telephone, 29 April 2014.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, “Letter Dated 9 November 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General”, 11 November 2011.

ought to exhaust all other means and take special precautions before resorting to humanitarian interventions.¹⁴⁸

The Brazilian document also cited that “the world today suffers the painful consequences of interventions”,¹⁴⁹ a point other BRICS countries emphasize as well. Although there were no formulated proposals on a military operation to Syria, some of the BRICS cite previous experience with foreign military interventions as a reason not to resort to that in the case of Syria. The South African Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation specifically recalls the military operation in Libya as a “major miscalculation by the West”,¹⁵⁰ while the Russian Ambassador to the UN states with regard to Syria that “the situation could not be considered apart from the Libyan experience”.¹⁵¹

The EU, on the other hand, appears to be silent on an option of military intervention in general. In its discourse, the EU does not spell out either a support or a rejection of such option. Even though throughout the given timeframe there was a lot of discussion about a possible military intervention in Syria by the Arab League, the US, and even Member States of the EU (France, UK, Germany among others),¹⁵² the EU discourse does not refer to it whatsoever. Consequently, the EU does not have a position comparable to the firm opposition to a military option by the BRICS. Potentially, that can give the BRICS more leverage in comparison to the EU in advancing their common position internationally. They proactively oppose a military option, so in comparison to the “silence” on the EU’s side, the BRICS are much more vocal. In communicating their position to the world, they profit from a combined sum of their voices, even if they do not hold exactly the same view.

7. Geneva peace process

The Geneva Communiqué, which contains conditions for a resolution of the Syrian crisis and envisaged a political transition, became the main point of reference in the discourse of the BRICS and the EU after the formulation by the Action Group for Syria. The Geneva peace process refers to all points elaborated in the Communiqué and

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ E. Ebrahim, “Twenty Years of South African Involvement in Conflict Resolution: Lessons Learned and the Case of Syria”, *The Department of International Relations and Cooperation*, 24 February 2014.

¹⁵¹ United Nations Department of Public Information, “Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria’s Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto By Russian Federation, China”, *op.cit.*

¹⁵² D. Dagdeverenis, “Military Intervention in Syria and the EU”, *OneEurope*, 6 September 2013.

the diplomatic efforts for a negotiated peace associated with the document, including the 'Geneva II' conference in 2014.

The Geneva Communiqué and its conditions became the embodiment of a political solution for the BRICS and the EU that they all supported in their discourses. In addition, the EU and the BRICS expressed their "full support" to the UN-Arab League envoys in leading the process. There is a strong linkage between the Geneva peace process and a desired political solution after the formulation of the Communiqué on 30 June 2012. As the Indian side formulated at 'Geneva II', "this conference is a convergence of the positions of global and regional powers with India's own [...] position of supporting a comprehensive political settlement of the crisis".¹⁵³ The EU also welcomed the negotiations aiming for a "democratic and peaceful political solution on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué".¹⁵⁴

As a bloc, the BRICS expressed their support to the Geneva peace process as a "basis for resolution of the Syrian crisis" in the eThekweni declaration. Considering that individually the BRICS declared their support even before the Durban summit, their common declaration can act merely as a restatement of their individual positions. Either as a bloc or separately, there is no conflict between the BRICS and the EU on the support for the Geneva peace process. Such a convergence is likely to be the result of the fact that Russia and the EU were part of the Action Group for Syria that formulated the Geneva peace process. For the rest of the BRICS it was an acceptance of a ready political solution, which they previously were in favour of.

8. Sanctions on Syria

On the imposition of sanctions on the Syrian regime, the BRICS do not portray a uniform opposition as a bloc. Rather, their positions diverge on the extent to which they see sanctions as a negative tool for dealing with the crisis. Russia, China and India have taken much more critical stances than South Africa and Brazil. The position of China is that sanctions do not serve to resolve the conflict, while Russia and India see even the "threat" of sanctions as detrimental. South Africa has taken a more cautious approach by not explicitly opposing sanctions. Brazil was moderate in its position on sanctions, mostly stating that unilateral sanctions already in place should be removed because they have a negative impact on the civilian

¹⁵³ Government of India – Ministry of External Affairs, "External Affairs Minister's Statement at the International Conference on Syria (Geneva-II)", 22 January 2014.

¹⁵⁴ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Syria*, 3241st Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, 27 May 2013, p. 1.

population.¹⁵⁵ Lastly, only one common declaration of the BRICS in the foreign ministers format denounces the use of sanctions against Damascus, because they would provoke the opposition into confrontation with the authorities.¹⁵⁶

As for the EU, its position on sanctions could not be clearer and further away from the BRICS since it imposed wide-ranging restrictive measures on Syria. For the EU, sanctions are one of the primary means to exert pressure on the Syrian regime. Moreover, the EU has called on the international community to follow its example.¹⁵⁷ However, none of the BRICS countries imposed unilateral sanctions on Syria or the Syrian authorities. So, the positions of the BRICS and the EU on sanctions are in opposition to each other.

To complement the discourse analysis, the next section presents voting of the BRICS in the UNSC and the UNGA as a direct indicator of their positions on the Syrian crisis. While there can be a room for interpretation of official discourse, voting on UNSC or UNGA resolution clearly states a country's stance on an issue, and allows for a direct comparison between the BRICS.

Voting in the United Nations

The BRICS proved to be highly incoherent in their voting behaviour on the issue of the Syrian crisis at the UN. From nine resolutions in the UNSC and UNGA that were not voted on unanimously, there was no single resolution on Syria on which they all voted as a bloc. Their voting breakdown is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: BRICS Voting Patterns on Syria in the UNSC

	4 October 2011 S/2011/612	4 February 2012 S/2012/77	19 July 2012 S/2012/538	22 May 2014 S/2014/348
Russia	No	No	No	No
China	No	No	No	No
India	Abstain	Yes	Yes	N/A (Not part of the UNSC)
Brazil	Abstain	Yes	N/A (Not part of the UNSC)	N/A (Not part of the UNSC)
South Africa	Abstain	Yes	Abstain	N/A (Not part of the UNSC)

Source: compiled by the author.

¹⁵⁵ Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Guilherme de Aguiar Patriota, Deputy Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations - Open debate on the Situation in The Middle East, Including the Question of Palestine", 22 October 2013.

¹⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press Release: BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting", *BRICS Information Centre*, 24 September 2011.

¹⁵⁷ European Council, "Speech by Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council to the Annual Conference of EU Ambassadors", 30 November 2011.

Table 2: BRICS Voting Patterns on Syria in the UNGA

	19 December 2011 A/RES/66/176	16 February 2012 A/RES/66/253	3 August 2012 A/RES/66/253 B	15 May 2013 A/RES/67/262	18 December 2013 A/RES/68/183
Russia	Abstain	No	No	No	No
China	Abstain	No	No	No	No
India	Abstain	Yes	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain
Brazil	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abstain	Yes
South Africa	Abstain	Yes	Yes	Abstain	Abstain

Source: compiled by the author

The BRICS showed an ambivalent behaviour both in the UNSC and the UNGA. There were only four cases when India, Brazil and South Africa voted in the same way, but then their voting was not in line with Russia and China. These findings on the voting behaviour confirm other empirical analyses that did not find the BRICS to be a coherent voting bloc in the UNGA.¹⁵⁸

The only actors that voted consistently with each other are China and Russia. As permanent members of the UNSC, they effectively used their power of veto to block resolutions when they considered it necessary. One can argue that in the UNSC, Russia and China do not need to garner support in terms of voting because their own separate votes can veto any tabled resolution. In that sense, their permanent positions do not predispose Russia and China to foster cooperation with other BRICS members. If displaying the BRICS' solidarity and strength in terms of aggregate voting power in the UN would be a priority for China and Russia, they could have achieved it by aligning their votes with the rest of the BRICS or persuading the latter to vote with them. There was a perfect opportunity for exposing such solidarity when all of the BRICS were in the UNSC in 2011. In that rare configuration, Brazil, India and South Africa could temporarily overcome a difference in status with China and Russia, even if still being only non-permanent members. Yet, on the two UNSC resolutions that condemned the use of violence and the human rights violations by the Syrian authorities, all of the BRICS were divided between the permanent and non-permanent members.

The EU has only observer status at the UNGA and no status at the UNSC and as a result no voting powers,¹⁵⁹ so the voting of the BRICS cannot be compared to that of the EU. The BRICS themselves did not produce a coherent voting as a bloc,

¹⁵⁸ Keukeleire *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁹ European Union Delegation to the United Nations – New York, "About the EU at the UN", 2 January 2014.

neither in the UNSC nor in the UNGA. Therefore, the BRICS cannot be taken as a formation that may pose a challenge to the EU in the UN. A real power to block initiatives on the level of the UNSC remains only with China and Russia, whose permanent membership as a factor is unlikely to change in a near future.

Conclusions: a low and perforated BRICS wall

The aim of this study was to explore to what extent the BRICS had a cohesive position on the Syrian crisis, and to what degree they challenged the position of the EU. The discourse analysis of the official positions of the BRICS and the EU on the Syrian crisis did not produce a definite confirmation of the original hypotheses, but leads to several conclusions about the foreign policies of the EU and the BRICS.

On the Syrian crisis, as defined through the indicators in this study, the BRICS showed cohesive responses only by opposition to a military intervention, support for the principle of national sovereignty, and endorsement of a political solution and the Geneva peace process. However, their cohesion on a political solution and the Geneva peace process does not necessarily imply cohesion as a bloc due to the nature of those indicators. In the positions of all the BRICS, a political solution appears to be the lowest common denominator that was embodied by the terms of the Geneva peace process. On the other indicators – sanctions as a solution to the crisis, support for either Assad or the Syrian opposition, and the principle of non-intervention – the BRICS did not have a uniform position. Since there was no cohesion in terms of positions or even a lack of expressed positions of some members of the BRICS on those indicators, the analysis could not even proceed to the stage of a comparison of the BRICS' positions with those of the EU.

As a whole, there was not enough evidence in the analysis to confirm the initial hypothesis that the BRICS can oppose the EU's position when they take cohesive positions as a bloc. When the BRICS had a cohesive position, there was either no expressed position of the EU as in the case of a military intervention, or the EU was partially supportive as in the case of the national sovereignty principle. Overall, the analysis did not find the EU and the BRICS to have completely polarized opinions. Therefore, one of the conclusions is that their positions on the Syrian crisis are not in a clear contradiction.

The other hypothesis that the BRICS and the EU have a similar position on non-intervention in Syria was partially confirmed. The BRICS and the EU appear

supportive of a resolution of the Syrian crisis through a political solution as part of the Geneva peace process. But the analysis of the EU discourse did not reveal a definite opposition to the military intervention like the BRICS. While it is unclear whether the EU would be in favour of such an option if it would have a common EU position, the EU has nothing to offer in response to a strong opposition of the BRICS to a foreign military intervention in Syria.

Furthermore, the results of the discourse analysis showed that the EU and the BRICS had different approaches to the crisis. The principles of the national sovereignty and non-intervention were not as important for the EU as for the BRICS. Their support for the protection of national sovereignty correlated with their resistance to a military intervention in Syria.

Unexpectedly, the study did not confirm a view held in the literature that all of the BRICS adhere to the principle of non-intervention. As a result, the BRICS cannot claim to hold this principle to be common to all of them, and for it to be something that distinguishes them from Western actors such as the EU. As an additional indicator regarding possible solutions to the crisis, the attitudes of the EU and the BRICS on sanctions on the Syrian regime are divergent, with the lack of a coherent opposition by the BRICS and an outright support by the EU. Therefore, the EU and the BRICS have different approaches in tackling the crisis by supporting diverging solutions and principles.

Future research can develop more indicators to present a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the crisis. For example, further research can explore positions of the EU and the BRICS towards external actors that appear to be relevant for the crisis, such as Iran, an ally of the Syrian regime whose invitation to the Geneva peace process was a controversial issue.¹⁶⁰ An analysis could also be undertaken of the positions of EU Member States in the UN bodies in order to explore the aggregate position of the EU as expressed through its voting representatives. Another way to enrich the analysis would be to explore the deeper underlying reasons for the positions taken, a task which is wider than scope of this study.

The findings of the research can serve as a further proof that the BRICS do not constitute a bloc. Even their common positions expressed through BRICS-level statements are results of a convergence of individual positions on a country level. The BRICS voting patterns in the UN serve as additional evidence for a lack of bloc

¹⁶⁰ "What is the Geneva II Conference on Syria?", *BBC*, 22 January 2014.

behaviour. Consequently, it would be premature for EU foreign policy to approach the BRICS as a coherent bloc on all issues. Nevertheless, if the BRICS would manage to achieve a cohesive position, such as on a military intervention in Syria, they could constitute a strong counterweight to the EU, especially if the latter does not have a defined position.

Considering the findings against the theoretical discussion on the shifting power balance, the emergence of the BRICS as a political bloc depends on the political will of the countries. Without such a willingness and conscious coordination their combined influence will remain limited. If the BRICS do not actively employ their combined political leverage and capabilities to attain some common goals, such as countering together the international influence of Western actors like the EU, they will continue to be only an *ad hoc* formation with no real power to set the international agenda.

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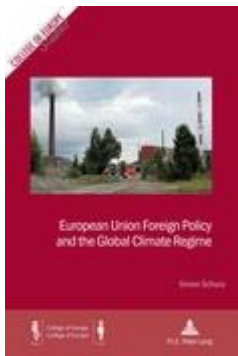
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