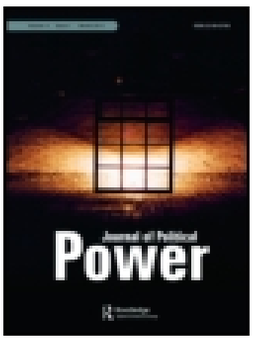

Journal of Political Power

ISSN: 2158-379X (Print) 2158-3803 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpow21

Do the BRICS possess soft power?

Oliver Stuenkel

To cite this article: Oliver Stuenkel (2016): Do the BRICS possess soft power?, Journal of Political Power, DOI: 10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232285

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232285

Published online: 20 Sep 2016.

Journal of Political Power, 2016
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232285

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Do the BRICS possess soft power?

Oliver Stuenkel*

FGV-CPDOC, São Paulo, Brazil

Has soft power in the emerging world risen commensurately to its hard power? Can the BRICS' soft power rival that of the West as emerging powers expand their global presence? An analysis of the questions above shows that, despite remarkable economic growth during the first decade of the twenty-first century, BRICS countries' capacity to enhance their soft power is highly uneven, and they still struggle to rival established Western powers in most of the concept's dimensions. Still, the BRICS grouping, created on the basis of economic forecasts, is increasingly being used as a platform to enhance soft power, primarily through the creation of the New Development Bank and a series of other institutions.

Keywords: BRICS; emerging powers; soft power; multipolarization; western-centrism

Introduction

A frequently discussed question in the context of ongoing multipolarization is whether soft power in the emerging world has risen commensurately to its hard power. Are the BRICS countries capable of challenging the West's attractiveness? Could China's soft power rival that of the United States once it becomes the world's largest economy? These questions have spawned a broad discussion, which, as I argue, is very much connected to a much broader issue: the future of liberal democracy, economic liberalism and rule-based and highly interdependent global order (Gallarotti 2010, p. 28). Indeed, as Kearn (2011, p. 72) argues, significant shared mutual interests must exist for states to be concerned about their reputations in a given context and to view institutional rules and norms as valuable. Outside such an interdependent system – say, in a Hobbesian world – soft power is less likely to play a major role.

A group of scholars often called 'declinists' in the West have argued that as China's economic influence – and that of a group of other, non-Western powers – will increase, so will its political influence and soft power.[1] Others, including Joseph Nye, creator of the soft power term, argue that the West will remain the upper hand in the soft power realm even if China becomes the world's largest economy.[2] In *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Shambaugh (2014) subscribes to this view, arguing that China has no friends and no soft power, and that its cultural products fail to set global trends like those of the United States. Indeed, there seems to be a vague consensus that BRICS countries have acquired formidable economic strength, but that their soft power remains weak (Congjun 2014).[3]

*Email: oliver.stuenkel@fgv.br

In this article I argue that the discussion about emerging powers and soft power suffers from theoretical limitations of the soft power concept, which become particularly clear when applying it to the BRICS. Indeed, many scholars argue that the idea of soft power fails to withstand more rigorous conceptual scrutiny (Kearn 2011, p. 71). Given the contradictions and limitations of the concept, discussions about soft power are inevitably somewhat vague. Still, the topic matters greatly and deserves to be analyzed in detail. The debate about rising non-Western state actors and soft power points to intriguing questions about rising powers' capacity to increase their global influence and shape the international agenda. This discussion is far from settled, and there is no consensus about how the lack of political freedom in two of the BRICS countries, Russia and China, or high levels of poverty (India) or violence (Brazil) affect their capacity to influence others beyond traditional forms of power. Indeed, the fact that the world looks set to be increasingly dominated by economies with a relatively low GDP per capita and internal challenges typical of developing country status is set to complicate discussions about who can serve as a model in the future, and towards whom poor countries will look for orientation, inspiration and emulation.

This article is divided into two parts. In the first section, I offer some brief considerations about the limitations of the concept of soft power when it comes to assessing emerging powers' global influence. This does not mean that policy makers are wrong to use the concept when they describe their strategies. It does, however, raise some important questions about the usefulness of the concept when analyzing the BRICS. Previous authors such as Kearn (2011) and Gallarotti (2010, 2011) have offered excellent analyses of the conceptual shortcomings of soft power, and this article will merely mention the main issues before focusing on the BRICS grouping.

In the second section, I analyze each BRICS member country's soft power using three case studies – public diplomacy, international legitimacy, and their society's attractiveness. I will also analyze the rise of the BRICS grouping as an institutional platform and as a vehicle to promote each member's soft power. This is particularly useful in light of the recent launch of the BRICS-led New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve Agreement (CRA), initiatives that underline the BRICS countries' desire to be seen as responsible stakeholders and contributors of global public goods.

The limitations of soft power when applied to the BRICS

The concept of soft power is one of the most notable innovations in the discipline of international relations since the end of the Cold War. It is one of the few ideas developed in academia that has successfully been adopted by policy makers around the world (Gallarotti 2011, p. 25, Kearn 2011, p. 65, Changhe 2013, p. 546). Leading policy makers from both the developed world and the developing world often use the concept. As Kearn rightly notes, it is hard 'to overstate the speed with which soft power has diffused from academia to practical political discussions' (2011, p. 65). Hillary Clinton has been called the 'soft power Secretary of State' for fully embracing the concept (Hirsh 2013) and India's former Minister of External Affairs frequently used the idea to frame India's place in the world (Tharoor 2009). Even the Chinese government has made soft power a central theme of its foreign policy (Suzuki 2010). Moreover, consulting firms have established soft

power indexes to rank countries.[4] Brazilian foreign policy makers have made soft power one of the trademarks of their foreign policy strategy (Amorim 2013). Even Russia, by many in the West seen as a country without any soft power, has embraced the concept. In 2014, Russia outlined a new soft-power doctrine entitled 'Integrated Strategy for Expanding Russia's Humanitarian Influence in the World.' The plan, according to Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, was to counter 'unprecedented measures to discredit Russian politics and distort Russia's image' (Robinson 2014). Examples include humanitarian aid, such as the financing of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre, opened in 2012 in the southern Serbian city of Nis as a disaster-response center with regional reach (Robinson 2014).

And yet, one of the reasons for its success, paradoxically, is that the concept remains vague and that it means different things to different people. As Kearn writes, one could make the somewhat simplistic argument that soft power has been reduced to a mere shorthand for what historically would be called 'prudent diplomacy' or perhaps 'public relations management' in an international context (2011, p. 66). Many leading academics think it is not a serious analytical tool. Hall, for example, writes that the wide and popular use of the concept does not qualify it as an appropriate category of social science analysis (2010). The importance of public opinion – often mentioned in the context of soft power – must also be assessed carefully. Taking the example of Brazil, Bruk (2013) goes on to write

> Brazil is the state where soft power plays a primary role. For the most part, the general perception of the country abroad is positive: Brazil is viewed as a state with a rapidly developing economy and social sectors, an attractive and exotic culture, and rich natural resources.

In the same way, a 2013 study by a leading business school, INSEAD, noted that 'Brazil is an attractive country in the traditional soft power sense. It has an appealing popular culture and a multicultural society whose people interact well with others' (Wu and Alden 2014). Indeed, the Brazilian government itself has embraced this narrative, and this phenomenon indeed deserves to be studied by scholars.

Yet, as mentioned above, the challenge scholars face is to provide evidence of how this generates any tangible benefits for Brazil's national interest – not to mention the fact that several of the ideas presented that supposedly increase Brazil's soft power are contested and only impact those who actually never interact with Brazil, and hence have virtually no impact on the bilateral relationship with Brazil. For example, superficial evaluations like the ones above fail to mention that more people are killed in Brazil than in any of the world's most lethal war zones. Between 2004 and 2007, almost 200,000 people died of homicide in Brazil, exceeding the 169,574 people killed in the twelve largest armed conflicts in the world during the same period. Iraq in 2006, at the height of the insurgency, saw only half as many homicides as Brazil in any given year (Stuenkel 2013). Furthermore, it is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Sixty-five percent of journalists murdered in Brazil since 2011 had been reporting on corruption, and government officials are suspected to be perpetrators in 52% of the cases (Romero 2015). Finally, calling Brazilian culture 'exotic' is a Western-centric view unlikely to generate much understanding in Ecuador or Colombia.

Brazil's soft power is thus strong in some countries, but not in others.[5] Western analysts often confidently assume that China will never be as attractive as

democratic regimes, yet populations in Africa or other parts of the world may not necessarily agree. As Moss (2013, p. 3) points out,

> In many states, China probably is wasting its time and resources when it tries to get people to watch CCTV, piles newsstands with English versions of *China Daily*, or part-funds its Confucius Institutes. These initiatives are doomed to fail in certain contexts. But these same activities can work beautifully elsewhere.

This shows that soft power is inherently relational (Kearn 2011, p. 69). The BRICS countries seem like an attractive economic model to several African countries, while their low GDP per-capita and their profound socioeconomic challenges are unlikely to generate much appeal in Europe. Indeed, while the BRICS grouping may be seen as an odd phenomenon of little consequence in the rich world, the opposite is true in poorer countries, and many governments – ranging from Turkey, Egypt, Argentina, Nigeria and Indonesia – have expressed interest in joining the grouping.

Considering that one of the key characteristics of the BRICS grouping over the past years was high economic growth (a hard power element), the difficulty to distinguish between hard and soft power further complicated matters. Even Nye himself is ambiguous about what counts as soft power and what does not. For example, he sometimes cites economic assistance as an example of soft power, even though it requires financial means, which, in turn, are an element of hard power. Rich countries can provide economic aid, poor countries cannot. In fact, several BRICS countries have, over the past decades, turned into donor countries. Some of that may have indeed enhanced their attractiveness vis-à-vis poor countries' governments – yet this strategy amounts to little other than buying influence, which, in essence, is a manifestation of traditional economic power. Summarizing the difficult task of differentiating between hard and soft power, Gallarotti (2011, p. 33) argues

> Indeed, their relationship is complex and interactive. The two are neither perfect substitutes nor rigid complements. Often, they can actually reinforce one another. In fact, it will often be the case that each set of power resources requires at least some of the other for maximum effectiveness (…). So even the employment of force can generate soft power, if it is used in the service of goals widely perceived as consistent with such principles, for example, for protecting nations against aggression, peacekeeping, or liberation against tyranny.

Nye writes that soft power is intangible – yet, economic credibility, though intangible, very much depends on tangible sources, as is the threat generated by a large army. Even shrewd diplomacy, seemingly an intangible good, requires a global network of embassies, which requires financial resources to sustain it. The difficulty of separating soft power and hard power is illustrated when we think about emerging powers. Many observers wrote about the BRICS' growing soft power during the first decade of the twenty-first century, yet this was largely a product of their fast economic growth – i.e. an expression of their (real or expected) hard power. In the same way, many observers pointed to the West's declining soft power – precisely because of its stagnant economy. Soft power thus blurs a complex relation between behaviors, resources and strategy, and it falsely implies using hard power as a synonym for

command power and hard power resources, and soft power as a synonym for co-optation power and soft power resources.

Applying the idea of soft power to the case of China shows further limitations and contradictions in the idea. While the popularity of artists like Andy Warhol around the world is seen as an example of US soft power, few would say Ai Weiwei's popularity in the West is an example of Chinese soft power – largely because the artist is critical of the Chinese regime. Hence, according to this definition, only those non-state actors are producers of soft powers who do not criticize their own government.[6] However, this restriction does not seem to apply to the United States: Yet many US-American artists have voiced their criticism of the US government, but no observer would argue that they diminished US soft power. This tends to suggest that our Western-centric view tends to downplay non-Western sources of soft power.

The BRICS' soft power potential

When applying the BRICS' soft power potential in three specific areas – cultural diplomacy, agenda-setting capacity and the attraction of each society – it becomes clear that the grouping's performance is highly uneven.

Cultural diplomacy, an exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding, is a tool used increasingly often by BRICS countries to enhance their image abroad. Cultural diplomacy 'cannot change outcomes where policies are entrenched, but it can soften, clarify (…) and provide expanded opportunities for connection in the hands of an adept diplomat' (Goff 2013, p. 467). Language instruction, academic exchange and tours by artists are the hallmark of cultural diplomacy, a strategy pursued by all BRICS countries, even though China and Russia are the only BRICS countries that have the financial capacity to do so in a systematic way.

In 2011, the sixth plenary session of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist focused on several cultural aspects, for the first time in 15 years (Yan 2011), and spoke of the need for China to promote 'its cultural sector to boost its soft power' (Pilling 2011).

As the *New York Times* reported,

> At a time when most Western broadcasting and newspaper companies are retrenching, China's state-run news media giants are rapidly expanding in Africa and across the developing world. They are hoping to bolster China's image and influence around the globe, particularly in regions rich in the natural resources needed to fuel China's powerhouse industries and help feed its immense population. (Jacobs 2012)

The newspaper also quotes Hillary Clinton, who, citing the growing presence of state-backed outlets like *Russia Today* (*RT*) and CCTV during a Congressional committee, said 'we are engaged in an information war, and we are losing that war' (Jacobs 2012).

Similar to *RT*, Russia reorganized the *RIA Novosti* news agency, laid off a significant part of its staff, including its relatively independent management. The agency's new leader, Dmitry Kiselyov, then announced the launch of *Sputnik*, a government-funded network of news hubs in more than 30 countries, with 1000 staff members producing radio, social media, and news-wire content in local languages.[7]

As Congjun (2014, p. 1), president of Xinhua news agency, puts it,

> Media organizations in those countries should enhance exchanges to learn the strategy and narrative technique to win the respect of the world, and to find effective ways to project the national image in an objective and ample manner. (…) The mechanism of BRICS is just like an underdog in the World Cup, which may well make its way successfully to the final amid boos and doubts.

Neither Brazil, India nor South Africa have anything of similar dimension. *Globo Internacional* is at times mentioned as a Brazilian attempt to strengthen its cultural diplomacy, yet it is directed at Brazil's diaspora and does not seek to engage non-Brazilian viewers.

Just like Russia and China, the United States and European countries have ample experience with cultural diplomacy, financing broadcasters like *Voice of America*, *BBC*, *France Info* and *Deutsche Welle*. In the same way, they finance cultural programs through the *British Council*, the *Alliance Française*, the *Goethe Institute*, the *Instituto Cervantes*, etc. In that sense, there is nothing exceptional about the BRICS countries' strategies. Indeed, comparing the number of Confucius Institutes to those of European countries, one notices that China is by no means a globally dominant actor in the field of cultural diplomacy. The other BRICS actors lack a global network of language institutes, even though India and Brazil have undertaken sporadic efforts to promote their language abroad.

Despite the rise of non-Western news networks such as RT and CCTV, emerging powers will struggle enormously to establish news sources that can challenge established Western players and the narratives they develop (Johnston and Plunkett 2014). It is here that the West's power is most resilient, and change in this area is likely to be far slower. Great Britain's *BBC* in particular will be difficult to challenge, since evidence shows that neither *CCTV* nor *RT* enjoy the same levels of trust established broadcasters enjoy (Keck 2013).

Notably, the BRICS grouping – through presidential summits, more than twenty ministerial meetings per year and a growing number of people-to-people platforms (such as the BRICS Academic Forum, civil society meetings and sister city programs) – has promoted public diplomacy between member countries. Strengthening intra-BRICS ties also involved reducing visa-related bureaucracy and facilitating travel between member countries.

A second element of the BRICS' soft power is their perceived legitimacy and their capacity to influence the global agenda, and it is here where the question of perspective matters most. The debate about legitimacy is crucial because legitimacy is a fundamental element of hegemony. The hegemon's ideology and the system they put in place must be widely accepted and its rule must be deemed legitimate by the rest of the world. Legitimacy contestation, as a consequence, is an important element of international political change, and the systemic change of international relations could be viewed as a transformation of the parameters of political legitimacy (Xiaoyu 2012). Delegitimation creates the conditions for the emergence of a revisionist counter-hegemonic coalition. The revisionist power voices its dissatisfaction with the established order and forges the social purpose that will become the foundation of its demand for a new world order. Delegitimation and deconcentration of power could thus be viewed as preconditions for the creation of an anti-hegemonic coalition (Xiaoyu 2012). The key question here – that will inevitably

lead to clashing notions about the BRICS countries' soft power – is how to interpret contemporary global order. Many Western observers will regard the rise of non-Western powers capable of challenging the current distribution of power as a threat, and the end of unipolarity as an existential threat to the cosmopolitan project and universalist Western rhetoric, as the West will lack the material superiority to get away with openly seeking to remake the world in its image. In that context, revisionist rhetoric by the BRICS does not, of course, enhance their soft power. Echoing a broad consensus in the West, *The Economist* in 2014 bluntly stated that 'unfortunately, *pax Americana* is giving way to a balance of power that is seething with rivalry and insecurity' (*The Economist* 2015). BRICS countries, on the other hand, regard multipolarization and the contestation of US hegemony as a necessary change to assure that rules and norms will be respected. Many policy makers in the emerging world would agree with Reich and Lebow who argue that 'the United States has violated the responsibilities and roles assigned to a hegemon … constituting as much a threat to global order and stability as it is a possible pillar of its preservation' (2014, p. 37). In the same way, it often surprises Western analysts when they hear that Brazilian or Indian policy makers, when asked about the greatest threat to international stability, point not to North Korea, Iran or Syria, but to the United States.

When Nye explains the role of soft power in the United States' effort to build post-World War II order, his ideas are, quite naturally, US-centric, and very much based on US legitimacy. In his narrative, the cultural attractiveness of the United States convinced others to voluntarily hand the reins of power to the United States. From a BRICS perspective, on the other hand, consolidating the liberal order involved the stationing of US troops in the defeated Axis powers, massive economic aid, threats and coercion against communists in France and Italy, and efforts, in Europe and elsewhere, to impose US political and economic preferences. It was, above all, US hard power that made its leadership possible. In the same way, US victory in the Cold War must be primarily attributed to a more efficient economic system, not its cultural attractiveness.

Nye's soft power is an assertion of the US, or sometimes 'Western,' values of freedom and democracy. Indeed, while not using the term, the *Financial Times* essentially described a hegemonic scenario of the role of the United States in global order: 'The US is certainly not above using force. It has been at war with one country or another for much of the past century. But soft power has provided a narrative. Many people – though certainly not all – believe America acts out of decent intentions and is basically a benign power. That is quite a trick. China by contrast has had few wars in recent decades. Yet it is generally held in suspicion' (Pilling 2011).

Yet as Lankina and Niemczyk (2014, p. 1) rightly point out,

> Soft power, as Nye reminds us, is about attraction. Underestimating the true magnitude of Russia's attraction to a variety of constituencies and audiences risks further miscalculations of Russia's intentions by Western policy makers. One reason for the relative neglect of Putin's brand of authoritarian soft power is the earlier assumption by many observers (…) of a teleological process of a gradual diffusion of democracy and associated values among post-communist nations. (…) The underlying premise in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 is the perception of the West as a source of instability and danger in the international system – be it through causing economic

and financial crises; intervening in regional crises without a UN mandate; or meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign states in the name of democracy promotion.

The discussion on legitimacy, a key source of soft power, is thus marked by differing notions of the idea. While Western powers attempt to describe soft power in the context of multilateralism and liberal values, China cites the attraction of harmony and Confucian values. Brazil embraces multilateralism and liberal values, but its views are strongly tempered by its notions of sovereignty, as is the case with India, South Africa and Russia. Every single country embraces its own particular values, and rather than adopting a genuinely new foreign policy strategy to enhance their soft power, policy makers tend to merely present their already defined policies in soft power terms. Describing something as a soft power resource can thus 'serve as an endogenous validation of the policies and national discourses that political practitioners advocate' (Hall 2010). Soft power has thus political utility in serving to reaffirm the policies and values that political actors already work on. This is how all the BRICS countries employ the soft power concept, and this is how the BRICS' countries' joint rhetoric during the yearly leaders' summits must be understood.

Many of the arguments used by analysts (like Shambaugh) about why China lacks legitimacy (and hence why its soft power is limited), and why the world will see through any Chinese 'charm offensive' (Kurlantzick 2007) – often made from a Western-centric perspective – are bound to weaken once its economic weight increases. It is true that China currently has few friends – but that will change if China is increasingly able to economically support a growing number of countries or provide them with security guarantees. In the same way, the alliances many states will entertain with the United States may weaken, as seen already in places like South Africa, Russia, Venezuela and Argentina. In fact, there is considerable evidence that shows that China's hard power alone is already having a considerable impact, allowing China to 'have it its way.' As Jonathan Mirsky writes, 'Over the last few years, a growing number of world leaders, under pressure from China, have spurned or downgraded meetings with the Dalai Lama.' He believes this to be a consequence of 'Beijing's growing capacity for frightening and punishing those who might defy it' (Mirsky 2014). Still, Western analysts still generally see Western soft power strategies as more genuine than those of non-Western and non-democratic regimes like China (Suzuki 2009, p. 781).

However, when speaking about the provision of global public goods in the security realm, Chinese contributions of global public goods often tend to be overlooked. For example, in the last decade China has become the largest single military contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations in the world. In 2015, about one fifth of all UN peacekeepers came from China. In the field of anti-piracy in the gulf, China has been contributing its naval forces to that in recent years. The Chinese government has sent a battalion to South Sudan, and there is a presence of Chinese military advisers in Iraq to help stabilize the country. Contrary to the United States, China has not accumulated any debt with the UN over the past years. While there is no consensus about exact figures, China has provided significant amounts of development and humanitarian aid for decades, and it has recently launched a series of initiatives to strengthen infrastructure links in its region. Finally, for the first time, China nominated its peaking year for carbon emissions (2030) (Rudd 2015). This does not mean that China's global engagement is

flawless or even positive from an overall perspective – yet it serves as a reminder that the world's second-largest economy, along with other emerging powers, is no longer easily categorizable as a 'free-rider', 'shirker' or 'rising spoiler' that lacks any soft power as so many Western analysts suggest.

Similar things can be said, even though to a lesser degree, about the other BRICS countries. Brazil, for example, currently makes important contributions to dealing with international security challenges: The UN Peacebuilding Commission is chaired by Antonio Patriota, and MINUSTAH in Haiti is led by Brazil. Brazil's General Carlos Alberto Santos Cruz is the incumbent force commander of the MONUSCO mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, perhaps the most challenging mission in the history of the United Nations. Brazil plays a role in the global discussion about internet freedom and it is one of the few developing countries with a global network of embassies, capable of providing a unique perspective.

While Western-led institutions – such as the G7, the OECD and NATO – are generally seen as benign while groupings without Western participation are thought of as either ineffective (e.g. the G77), quirky and non-sensical (e.g. the BRICS) or threatening and malevolent (e.g. the AIIB, CICA or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) – i.e. not sources of soft power. Few analysts care to ask about the global public contributions provided by such organizations, and generally view them with suspicion. That points, though rarely stated explicitly, to a latent sense of Western entitlement and a notion that non-Western leadership initiatives lack legitimacy.

And yet, when it comes to agenda-setting capacity, established powers remain dominant. Yet paradoxically, neither US economic nor military dominance are the decisive factors. The global economy is multipolar, and while the United States military budget still makes up almost half of global military spending, the world has witnessed the clear limits of US military power during recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather, unipolarity is still a reality because the West – led by the United States – is still able to set the agenda in the international debate and engage on a global scale. Setting the agenda is the result of initiating, legitimizing and successfully advocating a specific policy issue – in the economic, security, or any other realm. Gallarotti (2011, p. 29) argues that agenda-setting is inherently conflictual and thus not part of soft power: From a Gramscian perspective, Gallarotti writes, agenda setting

> represents a kind of imposed control which manifests itself through a co-optive indoctrination. The radical vision is based on the idea of false consciousness, which suggests that the interests of subordinate nations have not really merged toward the interests of dominant nations, but that only a concerted effort to sell a universal ideology has inculcated a false sense of interests onto subordinate nations. (2011, p. 30)

As a consequence, he writes, agenda-setting would not qualify as soft power because in such a hegemonic situation there is an element of adversarial manipulation, which is an illiberal means of generating compliance – essentially fooling subordinate nations: 'There are definite winners and losers in these contests over the agenda, and the losers are cognizant of having lost' (2011, p. 29). While that may be true from a Gramscian perspective of hegemony, one may also argue that today's distribution of hard power – in the economic dimension in particular – no

longer qualifies as hegemony, and that non-Western powers such as China and others are already engaged in global agenda-setting.

Still, they have a long way to go. When considering the three key issues that dominated global affairs in 2014 – Ukraine, ISIS and Ebola – it becomes clear how little the BRICS countries assumed a leading position. Where do the ideas come from that shape the way we think and act upon these challenges? What have policy makers in Brasília, New Delhi and Beijing recently said about their countries' role in providing tangible solutions, and how have those views affected global opinion and policy?

Of the institutionalization of the BRICS grouping and more systematic attempts to provide global public goods – and thus obtain greater legitimacy and soft power – the New Developing Bank is the most visible example. Irrespective of the NDB's lending strategy, the new bank is welcome news from a development perspective. The developing world badly needs greater investment in infrastructure, and none of the existing banks have been able to satisfy such a massive demand. In India alone, expenditure needs for infrastructure amount to an estimated $2 trillion in the coming decade. Over the past years, Nicholas Stern, Joseph Stiglitz, Amar Bhattacharya, and Mattia Romani have campaigned globally for the creation of a new BRICS-led bank. As the four economists point out,

> The infrastructure requirements in emerging-market economies and low-income countries are huge – 1.4-billion people still have no reliable electricity, 900-million lack access to clean water and 2.6-billion do not have adequate sanitation. About 2-billion people will move to cities in the next 25 years. Policy makers must ensure the investments are environmentally sustainable. To meet these and the other challenges, infrastructure spending will have to rise from about $800bn to at least $ 2-trillion a year in the coming decades or it will be impossible to achieve long-term poverty reduction and inclusive growth. (Stern *et al*. 2013)

The NDB's impact on global governance remains perhaps the most interesting question, even though it will take years before we gain a clearer understanding of whether and how it will affect existing structures.

Many observers see the bank as proof that the BRICS have a revisionist agenda. Varun Sahni, for example, argues that the establishment of the NDB is 'a strong example of revisionist power aggregation, insofar as it challenges the structures and legitimacy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.' Others point out that the bank is a natural reaction by emerging powers to an order that has been unwilling or unable to include them adequately. NDB president Kamath insists that 'our objective is not to challenge the existing system as it is but to improve and complement the system in our own way.' Even though the bank's website states the NDB is 'operated (…) as an alternative to the existing US-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund', calling the BRICS countries revisionist would be misguided. Quite to the contrary, the NDB's launch underlines the BRICS' willingness to help fix a system that no longer satisfies existing demands. Only those who regard US leadership, rather than the system's rules and functionality, as the decisive element of today's order will call the BRICS revisionist.

As Chardell correctly writes,

> (…) the NDB and CRA mark the BRICS' response to the widely acknowledged shortcomings of the existing global financial system. A common desire to reform

> global economic governance was the issue that drove the BRICS together and gave them legitimacy in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. For years, the BRICS have demanded an overhaul of the Bretton Woods institutions, where Western powers remain overrepresented at the expense of emerging economies. China, the world's second-largest economy, has just 3.81 percent of total votes in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). To put that in perspective, France and the United Kingdom each have 4.29 percent, yet their economies are three times smaller than China's, according to the latest IMF data. Clearly, some reshuffling is long overdue. (2015)

The final element assessed here is the capacity of each BRICS member country's society to generate global attraction. This is, without a doubt, the BRICS grouping's greatest obstacle to greater soft power. Considering the much lower GDP per capita of the BRICS, this seems natural. For the vast majority of citizens, life in the West is more comfortable than in developing countries, and no rich society would ever seek to emulate a poorer, more unequal one. Other factors further reduce the BRICS' soft power potential. The lack of free speech in China will inevitably make it difficult for Chinese newspapers to be seen as trustworthy and impartial abroad, reducing their influence in global affairs. It will also keep the world's leading minds from accepting offers from Chinese universities. Immigration to China is smaller as a result, greatly affecting China's capacity to attract innovative industries. More seriously, it will keep Chinese students and future elites isolated from international debates, making it more difficult for them to set the global agenda later on. The very same limitations apply to Russia, and, to a certain degree, India, Brazil and South Africa.

The Skolkovo-E&Y Institute, for example, has compiled a soft power index, which includes categories such as immigration, universities and political freedom. Naturally, the United States received a far better evaluation than the BRICS. The US scored high in eight of our ten categories: immigration (total of foreign-born immigrants), universities (quantity of globally ranked universities) and media exports (the royalties and fees earned from the export of goods such as films, music and books) provided the biggest boost to US soft power. These are followed by political freedom, iconic power (Time Magazine's 100 most influential people), most admired companies, rule of law (the quality of a nation's institutions) and inbound tourism (global interest in the host country). The US scored low in only two categories, CO2 emissions and voter turnout (Yan 2011). While one may criticize the way this index is set up (Time Magazine is certainly a Western-centric publication and may be less likely to include non-Western actors), all these aspects without a doubt provide tough challenges for the Chinese government – yet bundling them together in an amorphous, ill-defined concept of soft power may not necessarily take the debate forward.

Most soft power rankings cite the United States' unmatched capacity to attract the best and the brightest from all over the world. And indeed, there is no emerging power that comes anywhere close regarding their capacity to attract highly qualified immigrants. Indeed, quite to the opposite, the BRICS countries are largely unable to attract any immigrants beyond their immediate region. The percentage of people who live in Brazil (0.3%), India (0.4%) and China (0.1%) but who were not born there is extremely low when compared to Europe or the United States, where the figure often stands around 10% (International Organisation for Migration 2015). The same is true for Western universities, which attract a far greater number of

students even than leading institutions from the BRICS, like Beijing Normal University of Tsinghua.

The West's intellectual leadership – its first-mover advantage in creating a network of globally leading universities, research institutes and news networks – is far harder to challenge than economic or even military leadership. Even several decades from now, many of Asia's leading politicians will have studied in the United States, and not vice versa.

Su Changhe writes that students who have studied abroad are 'a force which must not be ignored in the process of promoting U.S. culture' (Changhe 2013, p. 550). Yet it would be misleading to believe that cultural attraction is the only way to explain such data. Students who seek to pursue education in the United States may do so because they are attracted to Western culture, yet others may decide to apply because it provides them with the best career chances upon returning to their home country.

Elites from around the world have studied at Western universities for a long time, and understanding how that shaped their respective countries' views and foreign policy strategies vis-à-vis the West is a fascinating topic of research. Yet it is certain that there is no easy answer, and there are several historical examples of leaders who have worked or lived in the West but who later on adopted critical positions vis-à-vis their former host countries – such as many of the Indian independence leaders. Equally notably, several of the 9/11 terrorists had studied in the West. That relates to the point made above that admiration for Western culture may not necessarily translate into a pro-Western foreign policy.

Conclusion

Soft power has turned, over the past two decades, into one of the most important new ideas in the discussion about global affairs. As this analysis has shown, the concept is somewhat problematic as, partly as a consequence of its success and frequent usage, its meaning has become too broad. The concept's weakness becomes particularly obvious when applying the idea to the BRICS, whose foreign policy strategy is not based on a liberal internationalist hegemonic narrative as that of the United States. Yet despite its conceptual fuzziness, the idea of soft power points in an important direction, and this article does not seek to argue that economic and military strength are the only types of power that matter. Quite the contrary, it is of great importance to gain a better understanding of the less visible sources of power (Chatin 2013).

The BRICS countries' soft power potential greatly differs, yet it also depends on who is asked, as soft power is a relational concept. China may be regarded unfavorably by the Japanese at one moment, but better several months later. Brazil may be seen in a positive light by Europeans during the World Cup, but negatively only months later when news about high murder rates, human rights abuses in prisons and deforestation emerge. Russia may possess great soft power in Hungary, but not in Poland. Still, based on the brief analysis of some of the elements that are related to soft power, it becomes clear that all BRICS countries still face considerable obstacles as they seek to rival the West's soft power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. For example, Jacques (2012), When China Rules the world. See also: Kenny (2014), Lee (2012), and Leeb (2011).
2. Two examples are Kagan (2013) and Jones (2014).
3. See also Nye (2013).
4. See, for example, a study conducted by Ernst and Young (2012) or a 'country brand index' (Berry 2013).
5. While Brazil is generally seen in a positive light all over the world, its image in South America is mixed and has reached low points in the past years. For example, the Bolivian public has at times been very critical of resource exploitation by Brazilian companies. See, for example, Neitsch (2011).
6. Many other examples show that the concept fails to withstand more rigorous scrutiny. How to think about cultural products that generate ire and rejection abroad? Do movies like 'The Interview', which ridicule Kim Jong-Un, reduce US soft power in North Korea?
7. Read more at Nye (2014).

Notes on contributor

Oliver Stuenkel is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) in São Paulo. He is the author of the *IBSA: The Rise of the Global South?* (Routledge Global Institutions, 2014), *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lexington, 2015) and *Post-Western World* (Polity, 2016).

References

Amorim, C., 2013. Hardening Brazil's soft power. *Project Syndicate* [online], 16 Jul. Available from: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-more-robust-defense-policy-for-brazil-by-celso-amorim [Accessed 1 Feb 2015].

Berry, V., ed., 2013. Country brand index. *Future Brand* [online]. Available from: http://www.futurebrand.com/images/uploads/studies/cbi/CBI_2012-Final.pdf [Accessed 20 Jan 2015].

Bruk, B., 2013. *Attract and rule? Lessons of soft power from BRICS countries*. Institute of Morden Russia [online], 18 Apr. Available from: http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/politics/439-attract-and-rule-lessons-of-soft-power-from-brics [Accessed 16 Jan 2015].

Changhe, S., 2013. Soft Power. *In*: A.F. Cooper, J. Heine and R. Thakur, eds. *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 544–558.

Chardell, Daniel, 2015. The BRICS: beyond the hype. *The National Interest*, 14 Jul. Available from: http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-brics-beyond-the-hype-13322?page=show [Accessed 7 Aug 2015].

Chatin, M., 2013. *Brazil: a new powerhouse without military strength?* BRICS Policy Centre [online], Jun. Available from: http://bricspolicycenter.org/homolog/arquivos/WPMCBPC.pdf [Accessed 10 Mar 2015].

Congjun, L., 2014 BRICS nations must demonstrate their soft power through their media. *The Economic Times* [online], 15 Jul. Available from: http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/brics-nations-must-demonstrate-their-soft-power-through-their-media/articleshow/38407520.cms [Accessed 10 Jan 2015].

Ernst and Young, 2012. *Rapid-growth markets soft power index* [online]. Available from: http://emergingmarkets.ey.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/05/TBF-606-Emerging-markets-soft-power-index-2012_LR.pdf [Accessed 6 Feb 2015].

Gallarotti, G., 2010. *Cosmopolitan power in international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gallarotti, G., 2011. Soft power: what it is, why it's important, and the conditions for its effective use. *Journal of Political Power*, 4 (1), 25–47. doi:10.1080/2158379X.2011.557886.

Goff, P.M., 2013. Cultural diplomacy. *In*: A.F. Cooper, J. Heine, and R. Thakur, eds. *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 419–439.

Hall, T., 2010. An unclear attraction: a critical examination of soft power as an analytical category. *Chinese Journal of International Politics* [online], 3 (2). Available from: http://cjip.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/2/189.full#fn-6 [Accessed 8 Jan 2015].

Hirsh, M., 2013. The Clinton legacy: how will history judge the soft-power secretary of state? *Foreign Affairs* [online], May/Jun. Available from: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139110/michael-hirsh/the-clinton-legacy [Accessed 5 Jan 2015].

International Organisation for Migration, 2015. *Global migration data* [online]. Available from: http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/americas/south-america/brazil.html [Accessed 5 Jan 2015].

Jacobs, A., 2012. Pursuing soft power, China puts stamp on Africa's news. *The New York Times* [online], 16 Aug. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/world/africa/chinas-news-media-make-inroads-in-africa.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1& [Accessed 3 Jan].

Jacques, M., 2012. *When China rules the world*. New York: Penguin Books.

Johnston, C. and Plunkett, J., 2014. Russia Today launches UK version in new soft power onslaught. *The Guardian* [online], 2 Nov. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/02/russia-today-launch-uk-version-investigations-ofcom [Accessed 23 Feb 2015].

Jones, B., 2014. *Still ours to lead: America, rising powers, and the tension between rivalry and restraint*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Kagan, R., 2013. *The world America made*. New York: Vintage.

Kearn, D., 2011. The hard truths about soft power. *Journal of Political Power*, 4 (1), 65–85. doi:10.1080/2158379X.2011.556869.

Keck, Z., 2013. Destined to fail: China's soft power push. *The Diplomat* [online], 7 Jan. Available from: http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/destined-to-fail-chinas-soft-power-offensive/?allpages=yes [Accessed 4 Jan 2015].

Kenny, C., 2014. *The upside of down. Why the rise of the rest is good for the west*. New York: Basic Books.

Kurlantzick, J., 2007. *Charm offensive: how China's soft power is transforming the world*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lankina, T. and Niemczyk K., 2014. What Putin gets about soft power. *The Washington Post* [online], 15 Apr. Available from: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/15/what-putin-gets-about-soft-power/ [Accessed 13 Jan 2015].

Lee, A., 2012. *What the U.S. can learn from China: an open-minded guide to treating our greatest competitor as our greatest teacher.* San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Leeb, S., 2011. *Red alert: how China's growing prosperity threatens the American way of life*. New York: Business Plus.

Mirsky, J., 2014. Pope Francis's China problem. *The New York Review of Books* [online], 15 Dec. Available from: http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/dec/15/pope-francis-china-dalai-lama/ [Accessed 12 Feb 2015].

Moss, T., 2013. Soft power? China has plenty. *The Diplomat* [online], 4 Jun. Available from: http://thediplomat.com/2013/06/soft-power-china-has-plenty/?allpages=yes [Accessed 14 Feb 2015].

Neitsch, J., 2011. Liderança hesitante. *Gazeta do Povo* [online], 26 Jun. Available from: http://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/mundo/lideranca-hesitante-5hdmlvht0b4ziuv3yr1y51pam [Accessed 20 Dec 2014].

Nye, J.S., 2013. What China and Russia don't get about soft power. *Foreign Policy* [online], 29 Apr. Available from: http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/?wp_login_redirect=0 [Accessed 20 Jan 2015].

Nye, J.S., 2014. Putin's rules of attraction. *Project Syndicate* [online], 12 Dec. Available from: http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/putin-soft-power-declining-by-joseph-s–nye-2014-12#2XAKzYTAK14uhrMG.99 [Accessed 4 Jan 2015].

Pilling, D., 2011. China needs more than a five-year charm offensive. *Financial Times* [online], 9 Nov. Available from: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/12ff0d6e-0abc-11e1-b9f6-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=uk#axzz3TFSzBvCL [Accessed 21 Feb 2015].

Reich, S. and Lebow, R., 2014. *Good-bye hegemony!*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Robinson, M., 2014 In fight for influence, Russia can play good cop too. *Reuters* [online], 30 Nov. Available from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/30/us-europe-russia-influence-insight-idUSKCN0JE07I20141130 [Accessed 4 Jan 2015].

Romero, S., 2015. Murder of Brazilian journalist furthers alarming trend. *New York Times* [online], 7 Aug. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/08/world/americas/murder-of-brazilian-journalist-furthers-alarming-trend.html?ref=americas [Accessed 7 Aug 2015].

Rudd, K., 2015. Interview: Kevin Rudd. *The Diplomat* [online]. Available from: http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/interview-kevin-rudd/ [Accessed 9 Aug 2015].

Shambaugh, D., 2014. *China goes global: the partial power*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stern, N. *et al*., 2013. Proposed BRICS bank will be good for all of us. *Business Daily Live*. Available from: http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/2013/05/03/proposed-brics-bank-will-be-good-for-all-of-us [Accessed 7 Aug 2015].

Stuenkel, O., 2013 Fifty thousand homicides. *Post-Western World* [online], 3 Nov. Available from: http://www.postwesternworld.com/2013/11/03/fifty-thousand-homicides/ [Accessed 3 Feb 2015].

Suzuki, S., 2009. Chinese soft power, insecurity studies, myopia and fantasy. *Third World Quarterly* [online], 30 (4). Available from: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436590902867300#.VPSibvnF9qU [Accessed 28 Feb 2015].

Suzuki, S., 2010. The myth and reality of China's soft power. *In*: I. Parmar and M. Cox, eds. *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 199–214.

Tharoor, S., 2009, Why nations should pursue soft power. *Ted* [online]. Available from: http://www.ted.com/talks/shashi_tharoor/transcript?language=en [Accessed 30 Jan 2015].

The Economist, 2015. The APEC summit and the Pacific rim Bridge over troubled water. *The Economist*, 15 Nov. Available from: http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21632452-weeks-summit-beijing-helped-great-power-rivalry-still-threatens-pacific-bridge [Accessed 8 Aug 2015].

Wu, Y. and Alden, C., 2014. BRICS' public diplomacy and the nuances of soft power. *South African Institute of International Affairs* [online], 16 Jan. Available from: http://www.saiia.org.za/opinion-analysis/brics-public-diplomacy-and-the-nuances-of-soft-power [Accessed 12 Mar 2015].

Xiaoyu, P., 2012. Socialisation as a two-way process: emerging powers and the diffusion of international norms. *Chinese Journal of International Politics* [online], 5(4). Available from: http://cjip.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/11/18/cjip.pos017.full.pdf?keytype=ref&ijkey=OFwAZliD9YHFyCU [Accessed 3 Jan 2015].

Yan, L., 2011. Guest post: China's cultural power. *Financial Times* [online], 9 Nov. Available from: http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2011/11/09/guest-post-chinas-culture-power/? [Accessed 12 Feb 2015].