

What BRICS lacks in structural power, it makes up for in connections

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OPINION



All in their hands

Emanuele Scimia says combined China and US pressure could get warring sides to talk peace

Israel's air strikes on Iran and military incursions into southern Lebanon against local Islamic militant group Hezbollah are visible defeats for US diplomacy aimed at de-escalation in the Middle East. China is getting involved, too, but it is still not a credible alternative to the United States as a mediating power in world crises.

In separate phone calls with his Israeli and Iranian counterparts, Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently called for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza and urged all sides to work for regional peace and stability. At the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September, Wang said of Russia's war in Ukraine that "China is committed to playing a constructive role, engaging in shuttle mediation and promoting talks for peace".

China is gaining stature on the world diplomatic stage. However, while the US is ready to take the risk of failing with its diplomatic actions, Beijing is not. The Chinese, it seems, are willing to participate in peace processes and whisper possible solutions – or, at most, facilitate talks – when actually, to play an indispensable role, they should be exerting pressure on warring parties.

It was not purely by chance that at an event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on September 24, Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib said "the United States is the only country that can really make a difference in the Middle East and with regard to Lebanon".

US President Joe Biden has called the death of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar an opportunity to end the war in Gaza. The US

is, with the help of Qatar and Egypt, continuing to negotiate a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas after one year of conflict, and is trying to de-escalate the confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah. The Biden administration has, apparently, managed to mitigate Israel's announced retaliation for Iran's ballistic missile attacks.

Both Hamas and Hezbollah are allied with China's friend Iran, a fact that should give Chinese diplomats room to manoeuvre. For now, that does not appear to be the case.

The dynamic is no different in Africa, which is dependent on Chinese trade, investment and loans. Sudan is a long-time energy partner of China, but the US is leading talks to end an 18-month civil conflict between the Sudanese regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

Somewhat surprisingly for a super-power in the making, China is not even scoring diplomatic points on its doorstep, such as in civil war-torn Myanmar. Despite its influence on the local military junta and several ethnic armed groups, Beijing has been unable to hold warring factions to a ceasefire brokered in January. In the meantime, the US government has reached out to Myanmar's opposition forces to increase support for a civilian transition, while India is reportedly trying to use its diplomatic influence in the country.

In July, China promoted a unity agreement among rival Palestinian factions over a post-Gaza war settlement. Accords of this kind have been little more than hot air in the past, and it is safe to assume that Israel and the US will never come to terms with a

Palestinian institutional actor that includes Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups.

Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh was killed in Tehran a week after the Chinese-mediated reconciliation deal was signed, and it is unlikely it happened by chance. Iranian authorities and their proxies have blamed the assassination on Israel.

Some observers saw last year's mediation to restore diplomatic relations between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia as a watershed moment for Chinese diplomacy.

When it comes to world crises, the US is leading but not delivering at the moment while China is failing without leading

However, aside from perhaps making Iranian-Saudi regional competition more predictable, the agreement has not actually produced any substantial results.

The war in Yemen, for instance, is a proxy battlefield for Iran and Saudi Arabia's regional power play. Nevertheless, the Chinese have not been able to, or seemingly wanted to, leverage the deal between Tehran and Riyadh to work on a permanent solution to the decade-long civil strife.

The war in Ukraine is an example of how Chinese peace diplomacy has so far been

flimsy. During talks in Guangzhou on July 24, Wang reiterated to his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba that China was committed to encouraging a diplomatic solution for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A few days later, Kyiv launched an incursion into the Russian region of Kursk.

Still, at the Brics summit of emerging economies in Kazan, Russia, last week, President Xi Jinping relaunched a six-point plan aimed at de-escalating the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Released in May by China and Brazil, it included the key principle of not expanding the battlefield.

The reality is that, when it comes to world crises, the US is leading but not delivering at the moment while China is failing without leading. So, what should we expect from the two rivals?

"In this changing and turbulent world, countries need solidarity and coordination ... not exclusion or regress," Xi said during talks with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Beijing on August 29.

A diplomatic condominium between the US and China would be optimal for conflict resolution, but that is out of the question for now because of apparently irreconcilable geopolitical differences. That does not mean the two powers cannot bring pressure to bear on actors at war, and not necessarily in a coordinated manner.

Combined pressure from the US and the Soviet Union forced Britain, France and Israel to accept a UN ceasefire and withdraw their military forces from Egypt during the Suez crisis in 1956. That was dictated more by competition than coordination, but it worked adequately nonetheless.

Emanuele Scimia is an independent journalist and foreign affairs analyst

LETTERS

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Respect the dos and don'ts when visiting a country

I refer to the article, "Uproar in Malaysia after China flags waved at Perak cultural event" (October 26).

Malaysia's Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil has rightly cautioned people against inciting racial sentiments about a cultural event where Chinese flags were publicly displayed or risk being investigated.

The incident took place during the International Guan Gong Cultural Festival in Teluk Intan, Perak state, where Chinese flags were waved by participants from China. According to reports, flags from other countries, including Vietnam and Thailand, were also paraded at the event.

While the Guan Gong Cultural Association of Malaysia, which organised the festival, has since apologised to the public and clarified that the flag-waving was not part of the official programme, I wish to point out that the public display of national emblems in Malaysia is governed by law.

The National Emblems (Control of Display) Act 1949, a pre-independence law, is short with only eight sections. A flag is of course considered a national emblem. Section 3 of the act prohibits the display of any national emblem – including foreign flags – in public or in schools, though there are exceptions (Section 4) and exemptions (Section 5).

Under Section 8, any person who displays any national emblem contrary to the act is guilty of an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding 500 Malaysian ringgit (HK\$886) or both.

The same law – in name and provisions – is found in neighbouring Singapore, which, like Malaysia, was also a British colony.

The law may be incomprehensible to visitors, but it should be part of the dos and don'ts of visiting a country, while the host should not be ignorant of it.

Mohamad Hafiz Bin Hassan, lecturer, faculty of law, Multimedia University, Malaysia

Intense diplomatic effort only way to bring Lebanon ceasefire

The escalation of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict underscores the urgent need for an updated diplomatic strategy. Lebanon's position is precarious. Israeli air strikes have severely damaged infrastructure, and Hezbollah's sustained military actions invite further devastation. As conflict pressures swell, the strain on Lebanon's fragile state heightens the risk of collapse.

Meanwhile, northern Israel grapples with daily disruptions. Thousands have been displaced as rocket fire continues. Israel's armed forces, stretched by simultaneous engagements in Gaza and Lebanon, face mounting logistical and economic strains. Without intervention, the financial and human toll for both Lebanon and Israel is unsustainable.

The international community's response must go beyond existing frameworks like UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was adopted in 2006 and aimed at ending hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel.

Reports indicate advanced discussions around a ceasefire agreement, led by the United States and other key stakeholders. A diplomatic window is opening for ceasefire talks facilitated by American and European mediators, with a suggested focus on a phased de-escalation, Lebanese Armed Forces deployments and expanded UNIFIL peacekeeping presence.

The US and European Union must apply diplomatic pressure to balance Israel's security concerns with Lebanon's stability. Under an international agreement and with Israel's commitment to respect Lebanese sovereignty and end hostilities, establishing a framework to reduce armed presence south of the Litani River, supported by a robust compliance monitoring system, is vital to breaking this cycle of violence.

Time is of the essence. Current signs of progress are fragile, and without sustained efforts, this conflict could spiral into a wider regional catastrophe. Diplomacy is imperative not only to manage immediate tensions but also to lay the groundwork for a sustainable peace.

Mohamad Zreik, Zuhai, Guangdong

Time for Hong Kong to show true diversity and inclusion

Your correspondent writes precisely about the changing global attitudes to same-sex relationships and marriage ("Redefining marriage is the best way forward, October 25). I married my husband in New Zealand two years ago, and we have been together for over 20 years. Our union is not officially recognised in Hong Kong, and we have no legal status in the eyes of the bureaucracy.

In November 2018, Hong Kong's Legislative Council failed to pass a motion to consider creating legal unions for homosexual couples. Some of the legislators who rejected the motion are still in Legco today, including Junius Ho Kwan-yiu, who said at the time it was "a golden rule that no study should be conducted for a cause which is obviously wrong". One cannot be optimistic about the outcome this time round.

However, Article 25 of the Basic Law states, "All Hong Kong residents shall be equal before the law". Marriage, a union of love, provides the foundation for a life shared and, with that, the prosperity such a union creates.

Hong Kong describes itself as "Asia's world city". Let's be world-class in embracing diversity and ending the discrimination that holds back our entrepreneurial spirit and creates the international perception that we are an intolerant society.

Mark Peaker, The Peak

Brics' power lies in its ability to win friends and influence

Li Xing says the group is making an impact on the world stage, even though it faces limitations

Alleys were on the first summit of the newly expanded Brics in the Russian city of Kazan last month. Since the grouping's inception, there has been a debate about whether it represents a marriage of convenience based on pragmatic, short-term interests, instead of any deep ideological or historical unity.

Critics argue that, despite its aspirations to reform the global system and chip away at Western hegemony, Brics lacks the necessary structural power to rival the established international order and achieve its goals effectively.

If this is the case, one must ask why are more than 30 countries expressing interest in or are seeking Brics membership? Why did multiple world leaders, including United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres, attend this year's summit?

The concept of structural power explains how power functions in the international order. It refers to the ability of states or non-state entities to shape the framework that governs the interactions of other states, institutions and individuals.

It involves establishing the rules of the game that affect the options, behaviours and preferences of states within the broader world order. By setting these rules, entities with structural power can impact the dynamics of international relations, economic practices and policy decisions.

The United States and other Western powers have exercised structural power in core domains, such as security, production, finance and knowledge, which enables them to shape the global order in a way that aligns with their interests. This structural power makes it easier for states that align

with these values to thrive, while those that diverge often face sanctions or isolation.

If we see Brics within the framework of structural power, then it is obvious that the group still lacks the ability to shape an alternative world order.

However, if we consider Brics through the lens of relational power, we can see that it is effectively influencing the behaviours and decisions of other states and non-state actors. Relational power refers to the ability to influence others and achieve goals by building and maintaining relationships.

Relational power is characterised by its specificity and situational nature. It functions within the dynamics between individual states or groups of states and is often exercised through methods such as persuasion, diplomacy, economic influence and the establishment of a collective position.

Brics' relational power allows it to promote collaboration, forge partnerships and influence global governance. As a result, the group is gradually elevating its significance on the world stage, even though it faces limitations in terms of structural power.

When diversified, multifaceted and multilayered relational power accumulates

Such developments could challenge US control over oil and gas pricing, perhaps signalling an end to the petrodollar

to a significant extent, Brics could become robust enough to either attain structural power or push for reforms in the existing power structure.

First, Brics now accounts for at least 35 per cent of the world's gross domestic product and 45 per cent of the global population compared with less than 10 per cent for the Group of Seven. Brics has arguably become the core representation of the Global South, the majority, in terms of population.

Second, Brics has a significant portion of the world's energy reserves. This creates new opportunities for mechanisms such as long-term purchasing agreements and the use of local currencies. Such developments could challenge US control over oil and gas pricing, perhaps signalling an end to the petrodollar.

Third, the sovereign wealth fund of the United Arab Emirates is projected to reach US\$2 trillion by the end of the year. That alone could significantly enhance the New Development Bank's position vis-a-vis Western-based financial institutions. Even though Russian President Vladimir Putin said Brics countries "have not and are not" creating an alternative to Swift, the proposal to establish a payment system for the group – if pursued – could end up challenging the dominance of the US dollar.

Fourth, China's relational power through its economic relationships, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, allows Beijing to affect the global economic system in terms of reshaping trade and investment norms, as well as challenging the authority of the existing financial institutions.

Fifth, as a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, India has continued to

trade with Russia despite Western pressure to isolate Moscow. This stance is primarily driven by India's commitment to strategic autonomy, its economic interests and its long-standing defence and energy ties with Russia.

India's recent rapprochement with China illustrates its delicate balancing act, as sustaining relationships with both Russia and China serves as a crucial bargaining strategy in its engagement with the West.

Sixth, Brics countries such as China and Brazil have approached the Ukraine war with an emphasis on neutrality, sovereignty and negotiation. This has influenced attitudes in the Global South regarding the war, such as the stance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Finally, Turkey's interest in joining Brics highlights geopolitical complexities involving the balance of power. For Brics, Turkey's entry could enhance the group's influence and boost its goals of promoting a multipolar world order.

For Turkey, Brics membership could diversify its partnerships and strengthen its diplomatic leverage, positioning itself as a bridge between East and West. However, Turkey also risks straining its position as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Brics is accumulating relational power, which stems not only from material capabilities but also from fostering connections, establishing alternative institutions and coordinating shared objectives among emerging economies.

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