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Objective, Subjective, and Socially Constructed Groupings in International Politics

Posted on [June 9, 2008](#) by [Arthur Stein](#)



BRICSAM is being proffered as a new grouping of states. Alan has written a set of excellent blogs asking whether the BRICSAM states have comparable wealth and power positions and whether all the countries fit in the same category or class. What began as a Goldman Sachs grouping of BRICs was expanded by CIGI with the addition of SAM (South Africa, Mexico and somewhat more problematically ASEAN (in some form)).

The exercise raises the question of how groupings of states emerge and how categories of states develop in international politics.

Objective Grouping

Some groupings emerge from some objective criterion. States can be assigned as elements to a set by some observable attribute: the set of nuclear powers, the set of oil producers, the set of democracies, the set of Latin America states, the of rapidly growing East Asian nations, newly industrializing countries, and so on.

Some groupings reflect an objective hierarchy, in which states are classified by their ranking on some objective criterion. In industrial organization, markets are categorized by the number of firms that control some substantial portion of the market. In international relations, systems are classified by the number of states that control some proportion of world power. A current characterization of US hegemony would

typically point to US defense spending being larger than the next 15 states combined and constituting some proportion of global military spending. Alternatively, a current characterization of international economic multipolarity might point to the proportion of world exports and imports of the world's largest groupings (typically treating the EU as a single actor).

The cut points that distinguish great from middle powers in such a hierarchy may be arbitrary and subject to debate, but the categorization is derived from some objective reality that is deemed meaningful to understanding some functional processes. Knowing whether the world is hegemonic, bipolar, or multipolar is meaningful for understanding various features of world affairs.

Subjective and Behavioral Groupings

Some groupings emerge from the behavior of states and their subjective and selected roles. The categorization of rogue states is based on a behavioral assessment of states.

States choose the roles they play in the international system and their choices need not derive from their objective standing. The US was an economic great power (perhaps, even a hegemon) in the 1930s but refused to play the role of one. Playing the role of lender of last resort, for example, distinguishes the hegemon. Here what is required is a self-conscious subjective view by any country that it is playing some role.

The flip side is provided by Canada, which has taken on international responsibilities that vastly outstrip its population, military power, and wealth.

Self-Conscious Groupings

Finally, there is what we can call a "communal designation." In this case, states initially come together on the basis of a desire to act in common and subsequently designate and invite other states to be members of the club. Franklin Roosevelt talked of the "four policemen" of the postwar world, and in doing so treated China as if it were on a par with the US, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. Roosevelt may have been prescient but he was not accurately describing the world of the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Winston Churchill derisively characterized China as Roosevelt's "faggot vote."

Such self-conscious clubs can reflect region (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation), attribute (e.g., the Community of Democracies), relative ranking (e.g., G-5), or interest (e.g., NATO).

Once formed, group members decide whether to expand their membership, which states to invite, and with what conditions. This pattern is reflected in every self-conscious grouping, as when the G-5 became the G-7 and then the G-8.

Global Governance and Clubs

The collectivities that play a role in global governance are socially constructed groupings. They are products of self-conscious choice.

Some collective designations, such as the NICs and the East Asian Tigers play no governance role. The designation simply characterizes a group of states with certain traits. The BRICs categorization began in 2001 as a Goldman Sachs designation of rapidly growing economies and became the basis of many investments funds.

But there was nothing behavioral or socially constructed to consider this a relevant grouping in international politics. Until that is, they decided to meet as a self-conscious group on an ongoing basis (see Alan's post of May 30 and my comment).

BRICSAM

BRICSAM is largely a CIGI construction, although President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has suggested adding BICSAM to the G-8. The question is whether it meets any of the above criteria for an international grouping.

Alan noted in one blog that South Africa ranks 25th in GDP. The BRIC identified by Goldman Sachs rank 9th, 7th, 4th, and 2nd in GDP, respectively, and Mexico ranks 12th. Besides the BRIC, the G-7, and Mexico, the following also rank ahead of South Africa in GDP: Spain (11), South Korea (14), Iran (15), Indonesia (16), Australia (17), Taiwan (18), Turkey (19), Netherlands (20), Poland (21), Saudi Arabia (22), Argentina (23), and Thailand (24). As Alan points out, South Africa was added to the list to have an African country in the group. In short, BRICSAM is not a logical grouping on objective grounds of power, population, or wealth.

If the BRICSAM set is derived from the subjective roles countries want to occupy, then it is essential to know whether the political elites in these societies entertain such thoughts and have an interest in playing a particular role in world affairs. The CIGI designation and various proposals that result from this enterprise are attempts to create a community to undertake various responsibilities.

Some countries see themselves as having a regional and even a global role, and others have no such aspirations. Some countries are interested in taking the lead in various international ventures, and others are perfectly happy to draft behind on the efforts of others. Since we have seen "buck-passing" in security affairs we should hardly be surprised to see it in less compelling circumstances. And so, some of Alan's posts have focused on who is prepared to join the club and exercise leadership.

Finally, the development of the BRIC as an ongoing self-conscious grouping raises the question whether these countries envision extending their membership to include SAM. As other states have discovered, not all who seek to join interstate clubs are invited, and late entrants don't have the leverage or impact of founding members. But more on this later.

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