Contagious convergent cumulative cooperation: the dynamic development of the G20, BRICS and SCO

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Abstract
The institutional development and performance of the Group of 20 (G20), the BRICS group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) have shaped twenty-first-century global governance. Each of these plurilateral summit institutions (PSIs) has different founding visions, missions, memberships, participants, institutionalisation patterns and priorities. However, the potential for competition soon gave way to contagious, convergent, cumulative cooperation. By 2021, each was countering COVID-19–created crises in a mutually reinforcing way. Each extended outreach to new members or regular guest leaders, expanded their institutions and civil society engagement, and embraced economic finance, social sustainability and political-security issues. They increased their performance on the major dimensions of global governance in mutually supportive, if highly implicit, ways. The three big non-western Asian powers—China, Russia and India—at the core of these PSIs drove this dynamic, contagious, cumulative convergence and applied lessons learnt across all three PSIs. This was reinforced by their increasing, shared need to guide globalisation and counter its shocks, from the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1999 to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021.

Keywords G20 · BRICS · SCO · Summits · Global governance

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Introduction

Twenty-first-century global governance, understood in this analysis as “the sum of laws, norms, policies, and institutions that define, constitute, and mediate relations among citizens, society, markets, and the state in the international arena,” has been driven by the emergence, evolution and increasingly effective performance of three plurilateral summit institutions (PSIs) with global relevance and reach (Weiss and Thakur 2010, p. 6). The Group of Twenty (G20), the biggest and broadest of these, emerged in 2008; the smaller, global BRICS group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and later South Africa arrived in 2009, and the compact Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established in 2001. All emerged in response to the growing demand for global governance in a rapidly globalising world and the inability of the formal, siloed, subject-specific, ministerially governed multilateral organisations of the Bretton Woods–United Nations (UN) system, established in the 1940s, to cope with escalating severe, synergistic shocks amidst major power shifts. All three new PSIs were based on leaders’ meetings, held at least annually, where informal, flexible dynamics, understandings and synergistic cross-subject linkages dominated the legal and organisational edifice erected below. And all were developed due to the critical policy choices of non-western China, Russia and India—their key common members and the world’s largest countries in terms of population or territory—whose relative capability and international connectivity generally rose.

The G20, BRICS and SCO institutional development and performance have shaped twenty-first century global governance as a whole. Each began with distinctive founding visions, missions, memberships, participants, internal institutionalisation and priority agendas. Yet their initial differences and potential competition soon became contagious, convergent, cumulative cooperation. In 2021, each focused on countering the deadly crises in mutually reinforcing ways. By then they had extended their outreach to new members or regular guest leaders of countries and multilateral organisations, moved to meet at similar times and places, expanded their institutions and civil society engagement, and embraced economic, finance, social sustainability and political-security concerns. All increased their performance on the major dimensions of global governance in mutually supportive, if highly implicit, ways. This bred convergent, cooperative, cumulative global governance, with the three big Asian powers of China, Russia and India driving the dynamic of contagion at the overlapping core of all three PSIs.

This study traces this dynamic by examining the institutional development and summit performance of the G20, BRICS and SCO. It identifies the visionary pioneers, creation, mission, members, participants, summit frequency, time and place, institutional development and outreach for each PSI. It also reviews their performance, measured through their expanding summit policy agendas and public conclusions, commitments, compliance and institutional development within and beyond themselves. This analysis shows how each moved from a very different, potentially competitive starting point to a more common, cooperative
one, with a combined, cumulative impact on global governance as a whole. This transformation was driven by the endogenous contagion among the three, especially as their common core and all non-western members of Russia, China and India applied lessons learnt in one PSI to the others. The underlying exogenous driver was their shared, increasing need to guide globalisation and counter its shocks, such as those from the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1999, the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, the global financial crises of 2008–2010, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 and the existential threat of cumulative climate change.

This study is the first to systematically treat these three twenty-first century PSIs together, to bring the SCO into the few studies exploring the connections between the G20 and BRICS, and to explore the structural relationship among these three PSI in not only competitive but also cooperative, convergent and cumulatively influential ways (Cooper 2017; Larionova and Kirton 2015). It does so by offering the concept of summit networked global governance, where a common overlapping core of systemically significant leaders radiates learning and influence in and out in an expanding way, for the benefit of all and of global governance as a whole (Kirton and Larionova 2018).

The SCO is the toughest case on which to test the thesis advanced above. Given the SCO’s initial Eurasian security focus, despite its dynamic evolution and expansion of membership, agenda and outreach, it has been mostly treated within regional and security studies. As with the literature on the more fully global G20 and BRICS, most analysts of the SCO are either highly supportive (Alimov 2018) or hypercritical (Aris 2009). Many dismiss it as irrelevant (Laumulin 2006), an inefficient victim of disagreements between its key members (Jackson and Lopez 2017), an instrument of Chinese economic expansion (Gao 2010), as part of Russia’s strategy to control the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Maduz 2018), or a vehicle through which China (Jia 2007) and Russia seek to counter US and western activity in Central Asia (Plater-Zyberk and Monaghan 2014).

Most accept the SCO’s success in countering terrorism, separatism and extremism (Miller 2014). Deborah Welch Larson (2020, p. 797) recently argued more persuasively that SCO success has been driven by a status-seeking China and Russia, particularly as “Moscow has played up the importance of various clubs and non-western organisations since the mid-2000s, in particular the BRICS...the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Group of Twenty (G20).” Though different from the BRICS and G20 in its mission and status, the SCO shares with them the key features of international regimes, \(^1\) operating on similar principles of consensus, flexibility, volunteerism, relatively low bureaucracy, adherence to group goals, \(^2\) extensive communication and informal contacts among officials and transnational engagement groups. Yet no one has systematically analysed how the SCO’s institutional development and resulting

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\(^1\) Defined as “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area” (Krasner 1982, p. 185).

\(^2\) In part a function of common interest and in part a function of past performance.
performance structurally relates to that of the G20 and BRICS, leaving unexamined how and why the SCO has expanded its agenda from regional to global governance issues and moved from initial disconnection and divergence to considerable contagious convergence by 2020, even if it almost never explicitly references the other PSIs, unlike other regional groupings such as the Asia–Pacific Economic Co-operation forum, which invariably refers to the G20 since its embrace of the G20 Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth in 2009 (Larionova 2018).

This study does so through an initial mapping of the contagion and resulting convergence of the G20, BRICS and SCO in their institutionalisation, processes and, importantly, performance, which is key to the effectiveness and output legitimacy they produce. It compares their features in these three domains, specifying which body led or followed the others, how fast and how much. Left to further research is the important detailed tracing of the process of how their leaders and agents learned, calculated and interacted to produce the largely contagious, convergent, cumulative outcome that the comparison reveals.

This study stems from the rational choice school premise that states create institutions because they see the benefits from the functions performed by these institutions, cooperate and follow rules because they calculate the costs and benefits which accrue from the institutional arrangements and want to maximise their gains (Hall and Taylor 1996). Simultaneously it underscores historical institutionalism’s emphasis on the duality of the members’ primacy in making the institutional choice and the institutions’ capacity to shape the members’ preferences, structure the political situations and influence political outcomes (Steinmo 2008).

Within the historical institutionalism perspective, the analysis highlights the temporal nature of institutional dynamics, its contingency on past processes and its understanding of institutional transformation as the product of changes in ideas (understood as collective solutions to common challenges) held by actors (Nexon 2012; Hall 2009). Applying a blend of historical and rational choice institutionalism logic, the authors highlight the benefits the G20, BRICS and SCO produce, the value they provide for the members in terms of strategic interaction, consensus-based decision making, norm setting and institution building, and the path dependencies they create.

In doing so, this article identifies the comparative advantage each PSI brings to constructing this cumulative edifice, in ways that lead less to anyone winning a zero-sum competitive race, but convergently, cumulatively constructing a more adequate, influential whole. Here the G20 uniquely offers genuinely global membership and predominant power, from entirely systemically significant actors as members due to their high capability and international connectivity, and equal balance of democratic western and non-democratic non-western members and an institutional mission focused on the worlds’ greatest twenty-first century needs. The BRICS is a trans-regional group of rising, exclusively non-western powers, which want and need to be let into the inherited internationally institutionalised order to reform it more in their desired and well-deserved way. The SCO is a new entirely non-western club focused on managing traditional security concerns.
among its members but expanding geographically and functionally to become of global relevance.

The G20’s institutionalisation and performance

Economic crisis response, 2008–2012

The G20 summit began in 1999 as an annual meeting of the financial ministers and central bank governors of the world’s systemically significant countries, in response to the Asian-turned-global financial crises from 1997 to 1999 (Cooper and Thakur 2013; Kirton 2013; Hajnal 2019; Luckhurst 2016; Berger et al. 2020). It rose to the leaders’ level in response to the much bigger, broader and faster American-turned-global financial crises from 2008 to 2009. Its visionary pioneers were Canadian finance minister Paul Martin and US treasury secretary Lawrence Summers, who chose the members based on their new concept of ‘systemically significant states’—those whose combined capability, connectivity and vulnerability were critical for the functioning of the global economic system as a whole. Meeting these criteria were the established Group of Seven (G7) democratic major powers of the US, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada and the European Union, the non-western BRICS states of Brazil, Russia, India, China and later South Africa, the subsequently assembled MIKTA middle powers of Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia, as well as Argentina and Saudi Arabia. The G20 innovatively included as its inherited secretariats the G7-controlled International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG) as equal members. The G20’s dual distinctive missions were to promote financial stability and make globalisation work for the benefit of all. Its leaders began meeting twice a year, hosted initially by the Atlantic, largely anglophone G7 powers—the US in November 2008, the United Kingdom in April 2009, the US again in September 2009 and Canada in June 2010. Later meetings were hosted by the fellow democratic members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Korea in November 2010, France in November 2011 and Mexico in June 2012.

While most mainstream accounts of G20 governance argue that its performance declined after its initial actions in countering global financial shocks, they do not capture how its performance since 2012 has broadened from economic-financial to social, ecological and political-security subjects, and from reactive crisis response to proactive global steering, while simultaneously managing the greater global shock of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2022. Nor do they explore how this greater G20 performance has been propelled by the failure of the multilateral organisations from the 1940s, which still never meet at the summit level to flexibly and synergistically govern all global shocks, most recently the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic and security shocks that the World Health Organization (WHO), IMF, WBG and UN have not controlled on their own.
In September 2009, G20 leaders made their summit the permanent, priority forum for their international economic cooperation. In 2011, they started meeting once a year, relying more on the many institutions they had created by then. Their finance ministers and central bank governors, meeting more frequently after 2008, were joined by separate ministerial meetings for employment and labour in 2010, tourism in 2010, agriculture in 2011, development in 2011, and trade in 2012. In 2012, moving beyond economics, Mexico called a meeting that many G20 foreign ministers attended.

The G20, as an informal, summit institution, is sometimes criticised for lacking the technical capacity that the major multilateral organisations, with their vast bureaucracies, possess. But since the start, it has included as a full member the IMF and WBG, invited the UN Secretary-General to its summits, and soon added the OECD, giving the G20 full access to their combined technical capacity. The G20 created two institutions of its own. In 2009, leaders established the Financial Stability Board (FSB) which focused, as did the IMF, on the G20’s first mission of financial stability. In 2014 the G20’s Brisbane Summit created a subject-specific organisation, the Global Infrastructure Hub (GIH), to perform a critical task for which no dedicated multilateral organisation exists.

The 2008 G20 summit created four official level working groups to deal with core economic concerns, and soon after a fifth was added. The latter was reinforced in June 2010 by a new G20 Development Working Group. The G20’s civil society engagement groups formally appeared in 2010, with the economically focused Business 20 and Labour 20. The broader Think 20 was added in 2012 and the Civil 20 in 2013.

In responding to the American-turned-global financial crises and the regional European financial crisis, G20 summits performed well on their highly focused economic tasks (Kirton 2013). Their collective communiqué conclusions quadrupled from 2008 to 2012, while their politically binding commitments doubled from 95 in 2008 to 180 in 2012. Members’ compliance with them before the subsequent summit started at 75% in 2008, then declined, but rose to 77% in 2012. Their guidance of internal and outside international institutions rose from none to 65 and from 39 to 138, respectively.

Each summit had signature achievements. In Washington in November 2008, leaders defined the Common Principles for Reform of Financial Markets, agreed on closer macroeconomic cooperation, launched reform of the international financial institutions (IFIs) and expanded the existing Financial Stability Forum into the FSB. In London, in April 2009, leaders raised $1.1 trillion to stem the escalating financial crisis. The Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009 produced the Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth. In Toronto, in June 2010, leaders created market confidence by setting quantitative targets and timetables for member governments’ deficits and debt. Seoul in November 2010 strengthened banking regulation, agreed to shift over 6% of IMF quota shares to emerging and developing countries and created the Seoul Development Consensus. In Cannes, in November 2011, leaders countered the escalating European financial crisis by forcing the Greek and Italian leaders to withdraw the referendum on Greece’s future in the eurozone and accept IMF oversight of Italy’s progress on fiscal reforms. At the Los Cabos Summit in June 2012, the US was replaced as the global lender of last resort, as all G20...
members but the US and Canada assembled a $500 million ‘firewall fund’ that deterred panicking financial markets from pushing most European countries over the brink. In all, ‘the system worked’ (Drezner 2015; Triggs 2018).

The 2008–2013 summits gave birth to shared ideas, norms and institutions, established patterns of internal communication and cooperation with international institutions and engagement groups, produced tangible benefits for the members and international community, created dynamics and generated expectations of future returns. These factors became strong endogenous sources of G20 stability and future self-reinforcement. Simultaneously the benefits generated by the early decisions created incentives to stick to the policy and institutional choices, laying down foundations for path-dependency.

**Comprehensive global steering, 2013–2019**

From 2013 to 2019, the G20 summit moved to proactive, comprehensive global steering, increasingly converging with the expanding BRICS summit in this broader task. The BRICS saw the G20 as a vital partner and a key engagement forum, stating its shared commitment to ensure progress of the G20 collective actions, as the latter turned from its first mission of promoting financial stability to its second one, espoused by the BRICS, of making globalisation work for all (Duggan et al. 2020).³

Institutionally, G20 hosting overlapped with that of the leading BRICS and SCO members in St Petersburg in September 2013 and Hangzhou in September 2016 (Kirton 2016). Greater balance with developed G7 and OECD countries in hosting and predictability in timing arose in the summits in Brisbane in November 2014, Antalya in November 2015, Hamburg in July 2017, Buenos Aires in November 2018, Osaka in June 2019, Riyadh in November 2020 and Rome in October 2021.

The summit guest list expanded. Full ministerial meetings arose for foreign affairs in 2013, energy in 2015, digitalisation in 2017, health in 2017, education in 2018 and the environment in 2019. Engagement groups emerged for youth in 2013, women in 2015, science in 2018 and cities in 2018.

G20 performance generally rose. Communiqué conclusions reached new peaks in Russia in 2013, in China in 2016 and especially in Hamburg in 2017. The three top decisional summits in this phase were hosted by Russia, with 281 commitments in 2013, China with 213 in 2016 and Germany with 529 in 2017. Compliance rose from only 69% in 2013 to 71% in 2016 and 79% in 2018 and 2019. Russia and China uniquely excelled in hosting summits that developed global governance institutions, both inside and outside the G20. The 2013 St Petersburg Summit in Russia guided G20 institutions 190 times, for an all-time high, and outside ones 227 times for the second rank. The 2016 Hangzhou Summit in China guided G20 institutions 179 times, for second place, and outside ones 223 times for the fourth rank. Overall, rising summit performance was led by non-western Russia and China as well as Germany.⁴

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³ The pledge first made at the 1 BRIC summit in the Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries Leaders, June 16 2008, Yekaterinburg, Russia, and reiterated in subsequent leaders’ declarations https://www.nkibrics.ru/pages/summit-docs.

⁴ Data available from the G20 Research Group.
Russia, in 2013, added ‘inclusive’ to the G20’s prevailing principles of strong, sustainable and balanced growth and endorsed the G20/OECD Action Plan to address base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) so major US and European multinational firms would finally pay their fair share of corporate tax. Brisbane in 2014 brought ambitious action on gender and health. Antalya in 2015 added migration, youth and terrorism as a whole. Hangzhou in 2016 introduced a focus on the digital economy and the UN’s newly launched 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hamburg in 2017 added action on climate change and oceans, despite the arrival of an anti-environmental Donald Trump as US president. Buenos Aires in 2018, while afflicted by Argentina’s financial crisis and the US-China trade conflict, made progress on jobs, education and soil. Osaka in 2019 launched initiatives on ‘Data Free Flow with Trust’ and on preventing online platforms from promoting terrorism.

Despite tensions between members, the G20 retained equilibrium, continuing institution building, consolidating collaboration with international institutions and engagement groups, expanding agendas and advancing progress on collective commitments. Resilience in the face of endogenous pressures proved that all members and stakeholders involved in its extensive networks valued the G20 and had significant interests in sustaining it as their premier forum for economic governance.

**Comprehensive crisis response, 2020–2021**

In 2020, the G20 returned to crisis response mode in a far more unfamiliar and comprehensive way than in 2008. The COVID-19 crisis erupted ecologically, quickly spreading from being an animal and human health crisis into the economic, social and security domains.

The G20 rapidly returned to holding two summits a year, now in a virtual format. Its emergency summit on 26 March 2020 was the first ever to be held so early in the year. The second was held as originally scheduled on 21–22 November. Guest leaders came to the latter from Spain, Singapore, Jordan, Switzerland and nine international organisations: the economically oriented FSB, the International Labour Organization, the IMF, the OECD, the WBG and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the ecologically oriented Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the socially oriented WHO and the security-oriented UN. Leaders from six invited regional organisations came, but none from the SCO. Ministerial meetings expanded. Finance had five and the digital economy and employment ministers had two each. Those for health, education, agriculture and water, environment, trade, energy, tourism, foreign affairs, and now anti-corruption each had one.

The two summits’ performance was together broad and solid. The March summit’s 47 commitments were led by those on health and macroeconomic policy. A mere two months later, by 26 May, members’ compliance was already 72%, led by labour and employment at 100%, macroeconomic policy at 88% and debt vulnerability at 75%, while health had only 61% (Cicci and Popova 2020). The 107 commitments of the November Riyadh Summit’s communiqué were led by health and by
crime and corruption with 14 each. The summit guided institutions inside the G20 30 times and those outside 58 times.

Leaders at the March summit agreed to close the financing gap in the WHO Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan, contribute to the WHO’s COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, inject over $5 trillion into the global economy, minimise trade disruptions, and work with frontline multilateral organisations to support emerging and developing countries. At the Riyadh Summit they endorsed the Common Framework for Debt Treatments beyond the Debt Service Suspension Initiative to provide more relief.

However, G20 summitry in 2020 demonstrated a great gap between its modest performance and the growing global need, as the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic devastation spread. But the G20 did better than the BRICS, as the scheduled St Petersbourg Summit in September was delayed until just before the G20 Riyadh meeting. The G20 thus remained the central hub of a network of global PSIs, including for BRICS.

At the critical juncture caused by the COVID-19 and subsequent economic and social crises, the G20 managed to harness its own and international institutions’ capabilities for countering the pandemic and its consequences. The G20 innovated its engagement patterns to enable continued deliberation and decision making to resolve the crisis. However, the introduced institutional changes were incremental and situational. The exogeneous shocks did not activate a leap from one equilibrium to the other. The G20 did not implement normative or institutional reforms and did not generate transformative solutions, remaining entrenched on its path development with a risk of becoming locked in and losing relevance (Johnstone 2021; Kirton et al. 2022).

**BRICS institutionalisation and performance**

**The first cycle: building a group agenda and identity, 2009–2013**

The BRIC arose from a Russian initiative when the foreign ministers of Brazil, Russia, India and China first met in 2006 on the margins of the UN (Cooper 2016; Kirton 2015; Xing 2014). Convergence with the G20 came quickly when the global financial crisis hit. BRIC finance ministers gathered on the eve of the G20 finance ministers’ meeting on 7 November 2008.

Their communiqué signalled their shared aspiration to reform the IMF, WBG and the FSF. Their March 2009 meeting urged an allocation of special drawing rights (SDRs), which G20 leaders produced at the London Summit on 1–2 April. BRIC finance ministers also addressed the role of reserve currencies seeking to supplant the dollar with a supranational currency, an idea proposed by China and supported by Russia.

The BRIC leapt to the leader level soon after the G20. BRIC leaders first met in Tokyo on 9 July 2008 on their way to the Group of Eight (G8) summit in Hokkaido (Hansen and Sergunin 2015). They agreed to hold a ‘proper’ stand-alone meeting
the following year, which they did at Yekaterinburg on 16 June 2009, after the first two, highly successful G20 summits had been held.

At Yekaterinburg, the leaders defined the group’s distinctive foundational mission, which, like the G20s, was to advance the reform of IFIs and cooperation on pressing issues of global development. It directly added supporting ‘the central role played by the G20 Summits in dealing with the financial crisis’ (BRIC, 2009). At the core of the BRIC’s first cycle remained its support for the G20’s efforts, as the premier forum for international economic coordination, to stabilise international financial markets, achieve strong, sustainable and balanced growth and to deliver on the promise to reform the international monetary and financial architecture. A little more divergent was the BRIC reference to ‘serving common interests of emerging market economies and developing countries’. Most divergent was the commitment to ‘building a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity’ and ‘strengthening collaboration within the BRIC’. Though convergent cooperation was explicit in the BRICS discourse since 2009, it was not reciprocated by the G20. A similar trend in the G7–G20 relationship testifies both to the G20’s role in global economic governance and the G20’s unique nature bringing together members of the major advanced and emerging market economies’ clubs.

BRICS leaders held stand-alone summits each spring. By 2011, now with South Africa a member, they had added a second one on the margins of the G20 summit each autumn, when the G20 dropped to holding only one summit a year. This shows two forms of contagious convergence—meeting just before the G20 summit to shape its work and meeting separately in the spring to fill the global governance gap it had left undone. As with the G20, the BRICS followed a decision-making rule of consensus but in a stronger ‘unit veto’ form. Moreover, the BRICS hosting order rotated equally and predictably among all its members, giving each an equal opportunity to shape BRICS’s institutional development and agenda in its year as host and enough flexibility in the dates of the summits to accommodate the members’ domestic political processes and international obligations.

The South African president first attended as a guest and in December 2010 was invited to become a member (Besada et al. 2013). Jacob Zuma joined the third BRICS summit in Sanya in 2011. South Africa hosted the fifth BRICS summit in Durban in 2013. While far less powerful than the other members, non-western South Africa was already a G20 member and a significant emerging country that loomed large in its region. It made the BRICS more geographically global and more balanced between democracies and non-democracies, converging with the G20 in both respects. The BRICS’s regional reach grew when South Africa, in 2013, invited African leaders to the Durban Summit. In 2014, a joint session with South American leaders institutionalised the model of regional outreach and broadened the agenda, addressing multilateralism, peace, security and sustainable development.

The BRICS summit quickly acquired a broad, dense array of institutions. The early ministerial meetings for foreign affairs and finance in 2008 were joined by those for statistics, agriculture, trade and health in 2010 and by education and science, technology and innovation in 2013. Here, the BRICS led the G20, which
Contagiously created its ministerials for agriculture, trade, health, education and science, technology and innovation, and environment only after the BRICS had done so.

The BRICS also led the G20 in institutionalising engagement groups. In 2009, BRICS leaders decided to organise a Business Forum and a Conference of Think Tanks. In 2010, the Academic and Business Forums were institutionalised. In 2013, the new BRICS Business Council met with BRICS leaders. The BRICS Think Tanks Council was launched a year after the launch of the G20’s Think 20.

BRICS summit performance also rose. With full attendance from its leaders, from 2009 to 2013 the number of words in their communiqué conclusions almost quadrupled, and the number of their commitments tripled from 16 to 47. Their guidance to BRICS institutions rose from two to 26 references and to outside institutions it rose even more. Their compliance averaged 75% (Kirton 2015).

The BRICS’s agenda and achievements broadened. In 2009, leaders followed the G20 by committing to address the financial crisis and advance IFI reform but broke with the G20 on creating a multilateral or an SDR-based reserve currency. In September 2009, finance ministers proposed a shift of quotas and voting shares of 7% at the IMF and 6% at the WBG in favour of emerging market and developing countries. The G20 then did so at 6% and 5%, respectively, at its November 2010 Seoul Summit.

In April 2010, in Brasilia, BRICS leaders moved into the social, and ecological domains, largely leading the G20. Here they promised to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, develop cleaner, more affordable and sustainable energy systems and promote the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

In April 2011, in Sanya, leaders focused on the excessive volatility of agricultural prices, food security and sustainable agriculture, as did the G20 six months later. Sanya established BRICS leadership in global health, including universal access to affordable medicines and, presciently, affordable, quality and safe vaccines, almost a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

In March 2012, in New Delhi, BRICS leaders focused on macroeconomic stability and creating a new development bank for infrastructure and sustainable development projects. At their summit on the sidelines of the G20 Los Cabos Summit, they discussed reserve pooling and swap arrangements among their currencies. Amid mounting geopolitical tensions and regional conflicts, their cooperation on political and security issues expanded significantly.

In March 2013, in Durban, BRICS leaders agreed to establish the New Development Bank (NDB) with an initial subscribed capital of $50 billion, an initial authorised capital of $100 billion and a contingent reserve arrangement (CRA) with an initial commitment of $100 billion. They did so a year and a half before the G20 created the GIH. In the regional outreach session, BRICS leaders supported efforts by the UN, the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organisations to end conflicts in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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5 О СЭИ (About CCE). https://www.nkibrics.ru/pages/about-cce.
The early BRICS summits defined the BRICS institutional and contagion dynamics, created a unique institutional culture, norms and behavior patterns, and established an extensive network of internal coordination mechanisms and engagement networks. Similarly to the G20 in 2009–2013, the BRICS created, consolidated, reinforced and expanded endogenous sources of its stability. However, unlike the G20, the BRICS did not involve any international organisations in its deliberations, decision making or delivery. Yet it became embedded in the system of global governance with a mission of advancing a fair, equitable world order and reforming the international financial and monetary system (Larionova and Shelepov 2021).

The second cycle: intensive institutionalisation, 2014–2018

From 2014 to 2018, BRICS institutionalisation increased and summit outreach with regional partners continued. The first direct connection with the SCO took place in 2015, as BRICS leaders discussed sustainable economic growth and global and regional governance issues with leaders of the SCO and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The BRICS 2016 outreach summit addressed trade and investment with the members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In 2016, China initiated a BRICS Plus platform where BRICS leaders discussed, with the leaders of Egypt, Kenya, Tajikistan, Mexico and Thailand, the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, partnerships for development and coordination among economic integration blocs. In 2017, the outreach dialogue with Rwanda, Uganda, Togo, Zambia, Namibia, Senegal, Gabon, Ethiopia, Angola and the African Union chair promised stronger BRICS-Africa cooperation.

The BRICS decisions on the NDB and CRA were finalised with the Agreement on the Establishment of the NDB and the Treaty for the Establishment of a BRICS CRA at the June 2014 Fortaleza Summit. The Articles of Agreement provided for an equal distribution of the NDB’s capital stock and voting power among the founding members. The bank would support infrastructure and sustainable development projects through the provision of loans, guarantees, equity participation and other financial instruments; cooperate with international financial institutions and national development banks; provide technical assistance; and establish special funds (BRICS 2014). The CRA treaty defined the initial total committed resources distribution, the instruments, access limits, procedures and the conditions for the request and approval of swap transactions. Here, in a way, the BRICS followed the G20 with its FSB in 2009 and led the G20 with its much weaker GIH, to converge with both in 2014. Divergently (unlike the GIH), in five years the NDB became a global multilateral financial institution with a legal personality, a headquarters in Shanghai, a local presence in Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa, 76 projects totalling $28 billion, expanding membership and a commitment to become a premier development bank.

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6 China—$41 billion; Brazil, Russia and India—$18 billion each; South Africa—$5 billion.
7 Liquidity and precautionary.
for emerging economies (Troyjo 2021). The CRA remains a safety-net instrument of the five central banks, provided through currency swaps and macroeconomic situation monitoring and data exchange.

In 2014 at Fortaleza, leaders expanded their economic and development cooperation into export credits, the MDGs and the SDGs—addressing the latter ahead of the G20. They also led the G20 by introducing onto their agenda innovation, information and communication technology (ICT), cybersecurity, research and development. Moreover, to counter the G20 host’s questioning of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s participation in the Brisbane Summit in the context of events in Ukraine, the BRICS declared that the ‘custodianship of the G20 belongs to all Member States equally and no one Member State can unilaterally determine its nature and character’ (Republic of South Africa 2014).

In 2015, the first meetings of ministers of energy, environment, labour and employment, industrial policies, communication, culture and youth were held, as well as meetings of heads of tax authorities and senior officials for development cooperation. In 2016, the BRICS Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism was added; 2017 brought the BRICS Partnership to the New Industrial Revolution. While energy, labour and tax dialogues built on the G20 experience, environment ministerial meetings, as well as the health and education ones launched in the first cycle, preceded the emergence of their G20 counterparts in 2019, 2017 and 2018 respectively.

In 2015, the Civil BRICS, Youth BRICS and the Parliamentary Forum were established. A Memorandum of Understanding on Establishment of the BRICS Network University was agreed upon. The G20 lacks an equivalent university network to this day. In 2017, filmmakers, cities’ governors and media were brought in.

In 2016, in Goa, BRICS leaders addressed economics, the Doha Development Agenda, IFI reform, and BEPS implementation in a G20-supportive way. They adopted the ICT Development Agenda and Action Plan. Their Digital Partnership sought to coordinate national digital agendas, strengthen business-to-business engagement, technology transfer and standardisation, capacity building, e-government development and coordination within the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). They followed the G20 on combating terrorism in all manifestations, terrorist finance, money laundering, drug trafficking, crime and terrorist bases, but they led the G20 on misuse of the Internet and ICT. They confirmed the UN’s key role in ICT security, including through the UN Group of Governmental Experts process where US-Russian differences prevailed.

Leaders also had to cope with an internal crisis. Five days before the Goa Summit, India and China began their military disengagement at Doklam to end an almost three-month standoff (Chengappa 2017). This was a harder test than the toughest security one the G20 had ever faced, for at the G20’s St Petersburg summit, in 2013, the threat had come from an external power with its use of chemical weapons in Syria and catalysed the G20’s help in averting US military intervention.

In September 2017, at Xiamen, host Xi Jinping (2017) called for doubling members’ efforts ‘to comprehensively deepen BRICS partnership and usher in the second “Golden Decade” of BRICS cooperation’. Progress came in economics,
e-commerce, trade in services, investment facilitation, tax, customs, local currency bonds and culture. The leaders addressed UN reform, global health security, the SDGs and sovereign debt restructuring. They reaffirmed their commitment to work in the G20.

In July 2018, in Johannesburg, President Cyril Ramaphosa outlined his strategy to get South Africa back on track and build relationships with world leaders (Stuenkel 2018). The BRICS supported the UN’s central role in traditional and new security challenges. Leaders pledged to overcome the impasse in the WTO’s appellate body caused by US president Donald Trump’s assault on it.

BRICS summit performance also soared. Communiqué conclusions rose to new highs and commitments jumped to 97 in 2014, 130 in 2015 and, after dropping to 45 in 2016, rose to 128 in 2017, if only 73 in 2018. Members’ compliance also rose, peaking at 89% with the 2016 commitments. BRICS leaders’ guidance to their own institutions rose to a peak of 200 in 2016. Guidance to outside institutions, however, declined as BRICS leaders focused on building their own bodies. The BRICS supported, stimulated and endorsed the reform of multilateral organisations at every summit. But, diverging from the G20, it did not involve them in knowledge generation, strategic interaction, policy and norms development, or compliance (Larionova 2018). Rather, it relied on the extensive network of BRICS institutions it had built. Russia’s and China’s presidencies in the G20 and BRICS in 2013 and 2015, and 2016 and 2017, respectively, provided opportunities for the convergence of the two institutions’ agendas. Intensive engagement within the expanding number of internal mechanisms and outreach summits consolidated contagion dynamics.

**The third cycle: coping with the COVID-19 crisis, 2019–2020**

As the third hosting cycle started, the decade-long trend of increasing converging institutionalisation and performance faced severe challenges. Inside the BRICS, they came from the 2018 summit host, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who was instinctively opposed to international cooperation on climate change and who sought deeper trade and investment with the US. From outside came the eruption of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic in China in December 2019. The pandemic delayed the Russian-hosted BRICS summit in 2020. By January 2021, India, Brazil and South Africa had among the most COVID-19 cases and deaths in the world. Yet, these challenges spurred the BRICS’s resilience and its further convergent cooperation with the G20.

The BRICS Brasilia Summit on 13–14 November 2019 built on 114 events, covering a wide range of subjects. The summit communiqué contained 49 commitments. They were led by crime and corruption with 10 commitments, international cooperation with eight, international taxation with five and regional security with four, then three each for climate change, the environment and trade. Here, the BRICS followed the G20’s Osaka Summit in June in countering the rising ecological threat. These commitments secured compliance of 72%, led by trade and macroeconomic policy at 100% each, followed by climate change and by crime and
corruption with 90% each and biodiversity with 80%. The summit thus delivered across the economic, security and ecological domains.

At Brasilia, frameworks for the iBRICS Network, the BRICS Science, Technology and Innovation Work Plan 2019–2022 and the Digital BRICS Task Force were produced, and the PartNIR Work Plan was adopted. In cybersecurity, members continued discussing both the Russian proposal for a BRICS intergovernmental agreement and the Brazilian initiative for bilateral agreements among BRICS countries.

The Moscow Summit on 17 November 2020 was held in virtual form, after Russia decided in May to delay the summit, initially scheduled for July. It was affected by the standoff over the China-India Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, which had erupted in June, and by rising tensions in those countries’ bilateral relations.

Yet, to counter COVID-19, the NDB promptly committed $10 billion for crisis-related assistance in health and the economy. By June, it had provided $4 billion in emergency finance to China, India, Brazil and South Africa. It successfully placed two issues of a $1.5 billion three-year COVID-19 response bond and a $2 billion five-year COVID-19 response bond in the international capital markets. The CRA stood ready to respond to balance of payments pressures. The BRICS COVID-19 response included, as did the G20’s, exchange of information, support of the WHO, the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator initiative and the commitment ‘to work to ensure that, when available, the vaccine is disseminated in a fair, equitable and affordable basis’ (BRICS 2020).

In 2020, as in the G20, BRICS engagement smoothly moved online, with over 150 events and 30 documents adopted almost as planned. They included the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership for 2021–2025 and the Counter-Terrorism Strategy. BRICS members again supportively coordinated in the G20. Stocktaking and publication of the report on the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership in 2015–2020 strengthened accountability. Vibrant cooperation in the academic, business, trade unions, youth and civil processes, the Women Business Alliance, and finance and legal forums sustained the BRICS institutional dynamics. This showed that the group had become the institution of BRICS people and a platform for knowledge generation and inter-civilisational dialogue. These networks became important sources of the group’s resilience and equilibrium in the time of crisis.

The Moscow Summit produced 45 commitments, led by international cooperation with eight and regional security with seven, health with four, development, digital/ICT, crime and corruption, and energy with three each. Climate change had only one.

The BRICS stood the test of the pandemic and the military confrontation between its biggest members. In all, as 2020 ended, the COVID-19 crisis had engendered the BRICS’s greater and prevailing contagious convergent and cumulative contributions to the G20. At the time of the triple pandemic-economic-social crisis, the BRICS did not produce any transformative solutions or institutional innovations. Similarly to the G20, it made incremental changes and continued its path development, strongly sustained by the contagious dynamics of its multiple internal cooperation mechanisms and communication networks.

BRICS resilience proved the relevance of the uneasy partnership for its members, facilitating bilateral relations and convergence in approaches and promoting their
role in global governance as a group. The NDB successfully created a new model of MDBs and contributed to trust building and practical cooperation within the group (Duggan et al. 2021; Hooijmaaijers 2021). Given these developments, this article breaks away from the literature on the BRICS, which has ranged from its harsh dismissal as ‘a fable of our time’, sceptical assessments as a club incapable of developing a collective world order vision due to political and ideological heterogeneity (Nuruzzaman 2020) and critical judgements of the BRICS as a disruptive force posing potential normative and structural challenges to the existing liberal international order (Beeson and Zeng 2018). Rather, this article highlights the value the BRICS provides for its members in terms of decision making, norm setting and institution building, and confirms that is an enduring alliance having a profound impact on the global economic order, and increasingly the social, ecological and political-security ones (Hopewell 2017).

SCO institutionalisation and performance

The SCO was created as a regional, security-oriented summit institution in June 2001. It became a PSI of global relevance when India joined in 2017. Unlike the G20 and the BRICS, which inspired immediate analytical interest and multiple academic publications, the SCO long ‘remained one of the world’s least-known and least-analysed multilateral groups’ (Bailes et al. 2007). In the second cycle of its evolution, the SCO generated interest in its members’ academic community and a strand of literature emerged focusing mostly on the members’ strategies and perspectives (Tugsbilguun 2011; McDermott 2012; Koldunova 2015; Gao 2010; Jia 2007; Alimov 2018). With the SCO’s consolidation and increasing role in Eurasia, it began to attract interest from beyond its members (Grainger 2012; Fredholm 2013; Rozanov 2013; Plater-Zyberk and Monaghan 2014; Maduz 2018). Their assessment has been mainly sceptical and negative: criticising the lack of its members’ democratic credentials and questioning its substance and legitimacy. These points have been most pronounced in analyses from the US and UK (Bailes et al. 2007; Aris 2008). This section contributes to SCO studies by avoiding either overly supportive or hyper-critical viewpoints, focusing on institutional dynamics (Aris 2009).

The SCO’s convergent cooperation with the G20 followed a similar path as that of the BRICS, moving from an initial divergence to greater connection and commonality, with the BRICS serving as the first and strongest bridge. Yet, the SCO’s continuing security focus and traditional territorial conflicts between China, as a founding member, and India which joined in 2017, meant that the new, non-state security shock of terrorism, and even the health security shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, prevented this convergence from approaching the significant level of the G20-BRICS one.
The first cycle, 2001–2005: from a regional security mechanism to regional organisation

Unlike the G20 and the BRICS, the SCO, emerging from the Shanghai Five group of 1996, is a regional organisation with a formal charter, secretariat and written rules since its establishment in Shanghai on 15 June 2001. The founding members’ decision to institutionalise the informal regional security cooperation mechanism responded to the need for a deeper and more structured cooperation for building trust and good neighbourliness, strengthening peace, security and stability in the region and promoting a new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order.

As with the BRICS, Russia was always the driving force. China, whose leading economic city of Shanghai secured the name, provided strong support. They tacitly agreed China would lead the economic pillar and Russia the security pillar, a move welcomed by the other members for the broad agenda this would produce (Konarovsky 2016). All valued the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ of mutual trust and benefit, equality, joint consultations, respect for cultural diversity and desire for collective development (SCO 2001). They adopted the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism in June 2001. The SCO was the first PSI dedicated to countering these threats, doing so presciently before the 9/11 attacks on the US. Here, the G20 quickly followed the SCO’s lead, focusing on countering terrorism at its finance ministers’ meeting in November 2001 (Kirton 2015). However, the first BRICS summit commitment to terrorism was made only at the China-hosted Sanya meeting in 2011.

Institutionally, the SCO held annual summits of heads of state, almost always in the summer. It also held summits of heads of government in the autumn. Moreover, the SCO’s 2001 declaration established the Council of National Coordinators, which drafted a charter agreed in June 2002. It defined the organisation’s goals, principles, legal capacity, budget, areas of cooperation, organisational structure, decision-taking procedures, and relationship with other states and international institutions. The bodies included the Council of Heads of State as the top decision-making body, the Council of Heads of Government, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Meetings of Heads of Ministries, the Council of National Coordinators, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and the Secretariat in Shanghai. The declaration made three commitments, one each on terrorism, crime, and trade and economic cooperation.

The SCO decides by consensus. The charter states that members are not legally bound to implement particular cooperation projects; interested members can proceed and others may join later. Coupled with the SCO design as an intergovernmental, leader-level network led by annual summits, it creates sufficient space for informality. Flexible partial participation was thus guaranteed from the start, unlike in the BRICS and G20, where the exclusion of one member from a collective commitment

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8 The five plus the Republic of Uzbekistan.
9 China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan focused on confidence building, settlement of border disputes, demilitarization of border areas and fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism.
became possible only in June 2010. In 2002, SCO members signed their Agreement on Establishment of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent.

Following its first summit in Shanghai on 14 June 2001, its second in St Petersburg on 7 June 2002 and its third in Moscow on 29 May 2003, the SCO sought to build an outward-looking regional security system. The Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs focused on key regional and global security issues, notably Afghanistan (as the G20 finance ministers did in 2001) and increasing the UN’s role in the political settlement of Iraq. Ministers asked their national coordinators to define the status of SCO observers and dialogue partners and the SCO’s interaction with other international institutions. The Council of Heads of Government advanced multilateral trade and economic cooperation and agreed to the SCO budget for 2004.

In 2004, the RATS became operational. An agreement on combating illicit drug trafficking was signed. Following China’s lead, the heads of government approved the Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation and agreed to create conditions for the free movement of goods, capital, services and technology. Leaders also agreed to expand cooperation on transport, environmental protection and emergency relief. They began to establish the SCO Business Council and SCO Development Fund and gave Mongolia observer status.

The first ministerial meetings on environmental and cultural issues expanded the SCO’s institutional framework and agenda. The SCO signed the Agreement on Disaster Relief Mutual Assistance and the Agreement on Interbank Cooperation, secured observer status at the UN General Assembly, and signed memoranda of understanding with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the CIS.

At the fifth summit in Astana on 5 July 2005, India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran attended as observers. This made the SCO the world’s largest regional organisation in terms of geographic coverage and population (Evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2018). A revolution in the Kyrgyz Republic and violent unrest in Uzbekistan tested, but affirmed, the SCO’s commitment to sovereignty and noninterference (Miller 2014, pp. 24–25). The Central Asian states told Washington that their post-9/11 cooperation would fade (Clarke 2010). They asked that ‘respective members of the antiterrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use of objects of infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states’ (Kimmage 2005).

Since its inception the SCO became central to resolution of challenges faced by the Eurasian region. In the first cycle, the members consolidated the Shanghai spirit, established procedures and institutions, and dealt with the gravest security problems. The arrival of India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran as observer states in 2005 demonstrated the SCO’s value to the members and partners and its contagion dynamics. It

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10 The US applied to join the SCO as an observer in 2005 but was rejected on the grounds that its objectives on economics and political influences on global trade were not aligned with the SCO’s strategic goals (Grainger 2012).
made the SCO the largest regional organisation with an ambition and potential for global problem solving, and thus a major element of global governance.

The second cycle, 2006–2011: establishing an essential regional organisation

In launching the second hosting cycle in Shanghai on 15 June 2006, SCO leaders celebrated the completion of the SCO’s three pillars of security cooperation, regional economic development and engagement with countries and international organisations for safeguarding regional peace, security and stability. They supported a dialogue on the impact of ICTs on national security under the UN and established a group of experts to develop an action plan. The SCO Forum was set up as an engagement group, bringing together the expertise and ideas from the five members’ academia and professional communities to exchange opinions and research, generate proposals for the SCO decision makers and facilitate scientific cooperation, as the BRICS and G20 later did.

In Bishkek, on 18 August 2007, leaders adopted the Regulation on the Status of Dialogue Partner of the SCO. Work with the SCO observer states was adjusted to consider their views. The secretariat signed memoranda of understanding with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community. With Afghanistan lying ‘like an island surrounded by a sea of SCO member countries’ (Grainger 2012) and its internal conflict and crime infecting its neighbours, the SCO consistently supported normalisation and the International Security Assistance Force. It created the Liaison Group SCO-Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai and his vice president participated in the SCO heads’ meetings. The SCO Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Trafficking in Arms, Ammunition and Explosives sought to cut trafficking from Afghanistan. SCO leaders followed the ministerial G20 with an initiative on global financial and economic cooperation and members’ economic development. They also promoted intra-SCO cooperation in transport, infrastructure, banking and finance, energy and agricultural productivity.

Since 2007, unlike the G20 and the BRICS, the SCO has held annual joint counter-terrorism exercises. In 2008, it signed the Agreement on Arranging and Conducting Joint Antiterrorist Exercises and since 2009 it has held meetings with ministers of interior and public security. It adopted the Convention Against Terrorism. It also signed the Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, the Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Affairs, and agreements on cooperation in education and culture.

In Yekaterinburg, on 16–18 June 2009, SCO leaders decided, in language convergently matching the G20’s foundational mission, ‘jointly with the international

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11 Dialogue partners include Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia (2016), the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (2015), the Republic of Turkey (2012) and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (2009).

12 The Convention does not apply in the Republic of Uzbekistan as it is contrary to the country’s neutrality legislation.
community to make efforts to establish a more just, equal, all-embracing, well-regulated and balanced international financial regime responsive to the interests of all its participants and providing all states with an equal access to the globalization benefits’ (SCO 2009, para. 3). Sri Lanka and Belarus became dialogue partners. The Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security was signed.

In Tashkent, on 10–11 June 2010, leaders faced an uprising in Kyrgyzstan, with a state of emergency declared on 12 June. They promised to help stabilise the situation and maintain territorial integrity there, without interfering. They approved the Regulation on Admission of New Members to the SCO, the Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Crime, and the Agreement on Cooperation in Agriculture. UN resolution A/RES/64/183 and the Joint Declaration on Cooperation between the Secretariats of the UN and the SCO acknowledged the SCO’s role in strengthening peace, security and stability in the region (UN 2010).

In Astana, on 14–15 June 2011, Chinese president Hu Jintao presented an ambitious vision for the SCO as a strong, consolidated, expanded and effective multi-purpose organisation for regional security, economic cooperation, people’s prosperity, and global influence (Barsky 2011). Heads of government adopted the road map for implementing the programme for multilateral trade and economic cooperation, including transportation, power generation, infrastructure construction, telecommunications and food security. However, Russia’s continued priority of security cooperation prevented progress on China’s desire for an SCO-free trade zone and financial institutions.

The SCO expanded its agenda and outreach, bringing into the engagement the first dialogue partners, international organisations, and the business community and academia of the members. It continued the processes of institution building and norm setting. Similarly to the G20 and BRICS, the increasing returns the SCO produced for its members, especially in the security domain, also consolidated its value, reinforced its internal stability and created incentives for path dependency.

The third cycle, 2012–2017: struggling for security and economic balance

The third summit cycle remained dominated by security issues, focused on Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia, terrorism, separatism and extremism, illicit trafficking and other transnational crimes. Action expanded on trade and investment, high-tech industries, transport and logistics, and information and communications infrastructure. Leaders produced the Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation in 2013 and the Agreement on Creating Favorable Conditions for International Road Transportation in 2014. However, compliance with these commitments was low, as few concrete projects arose.

The Ufa Summit on 9–10 July 2015, held convergently alongside the BRICS summit, produced the Development Strategy of the SCO until 2025. It began the
Contagious convergent cumulative cooperation: the dynamic…

process of admitting India and Pakistan as members, gave Belarus observer status, and made Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal dialogue partners.\(^{13}\)

In Tashkent, on 8–9 June 2016, leaders backed Russia by opposing trade and economic restrictions without UN Security Council approval, supported a political solution in Ukraine and demanded full respect for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. They also supported China’s Silk Road Economic Belt and expanded tourism cooperation but took few practical steps.

In Astana on 8–9 June 2017, India and Pakistan became full members. This enabled India, as well as China and Russia, to further integrate the work of the SCO, G20 and BRICS, and made the SCO the largest centre of gravity in Eurasia. An SCO convention on countering extremism was signed to consolidate security cooperation. Security cooperation was most affected by the accession of India and Pakistan. Many had predicted that their conflicts in Kashmir and Balochistan would threaten the SCO’s future, especially as Pakistan sought to raise its status through accession to the SCO, while India wished to interact with China in an oppositional way (Kupriyanov 2020). Yet, in August 2017, India declared disengagement from the military standoff with China in Doklam that had flared up in June, even if their territorial disputes remained (Pandey 2020). Optimists thus predicted SCO membership could similarly help India and Pakistan and even build a full-fledged system for stability in Eurasia.

On 30 November 2017, in Sochi, the heads of government first supported reform of IMF quotas and governance, as the G20 and BRICS had done since the start. They also joined in supporting the SDGs.

Thus with India and Pakistan as the new members and the dialogue partners of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka, the SCO contagion dynamics made it global in outreach. It also explicitly put on the agenda global governance and development issues. The expansion and tensions between members came with a cost to the deepening of economic cooperation. However, the organisation withstood the pressures, both due to the value it produced for members and international community and the internal sources of resilience created over the years.

The fourth cycle, 2018–: reconciling the members’ interests and expanding regional contagion dynamics

At the first summit after expansion, in Qingdao on 9–10 June 2018, leaders issued no single declaration but made separate statements on trade facilitation and, most presciently, on countering the threat of epidemics in the region. This was a year and a half before COVID-19 erupted there. They thus added health to the SCO’s agenda in a major way, following the G20 in 2014 and the BRICS before. The SCO again delayed decisions on creating a development bank and fund, continuing this divergence with the BRICS.

\(^{13}\) Turkey joined the SCO as a dialogue partner in 2012.
In Bishkek, on 13–14 June 2019, leaders produced agreements with the secretariats of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, the FAO, the UN World Tourism Organization and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. They addressed many security and political issues and promised to expand and deepen cooperation for sustainable economic growth and the free movement of goods, capital, services and technologies. They discussed creating SCO financial institutions and expanding the use of national currencies in internal transactions. On health, which was a focus for the G20’s Osaka Summit two weeks later, they adopted an action plan for 2019–2021. More convergence with the G20 came with their concept of cooperation in digitalisation and ICT and in environmental protection for 2019–2021.

In 2020, the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and China-India border tensions in June prompted no emergency summit similar to the G20 summit on 26 March. Instead, the presidency postponed the SCO summit originally scheduled for July until 10 November, a week before the similarly delayed BRICS summit and 10 days before the long-scheduled G20 meeting. Amid this divergence, the SCO facilitated engagement between New Delhi and Beijing, as ministers of defence and foreign affairs met on the sidelines, expedited by the host’s mediation, to agree on disengaging troops and easing tensions between them (Government of India 2020). Yet India’s opposition to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Jacob 2017) prevented progress on cooperation between the EAEU and the BRI and the establishment of a Greater Eurasian Partnership with the participation of the SCO, the EAEU, ASEAN and others.

Leaders did agree to coordinate responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, to counter epidemics in the SCO region and to strengthen public health. They again covered IFI reform and expanding national currency payments and settlements. Most members supported creating an SCO development bank and fund. Russia still resisted creating SCO-only financial institutions, leaving partners to consider using the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund (TASS 2020).

By 2020, the SCO had thus developed a strong institutional and legal structure, while relying on informality, consultation among equals and consensus decision making at the summit level and in an expanding summit network with other PSIs. It produced good results on security, above all on terrorism and the China-India border dispute. Indeed, between 2011 and 2015, under RATS coordination, SCO members prevented 20 terrorist attacks, averted 650 crimes of a terrorist or extremist nature, neutralised 440 terrorist training camps and 1,700 members of international terrorist organisations (Alimov 2017). But the SCO did little on economic cooperation, failing to create a BRICS-like development bank or fund, an SCO free trade zone, or convergence between the BRI and the EAEU. Nevertheless bringing together non-western major powers and much smaller, geographically adjacent states, the SCO proved its value as ‘a cooperative forum for consultations, which has allowed both smaller and bigger members to balance their national interests and powers in the geographic area’ and increasingly beyond (European Parliament 2015, p. 8). Similarly to the G20 and BRICS, the SCO did not produce any transformative and innovative solutions in response to the triple crisis. However, it consolidated cooperation and proved resilient to the endogenous pressures and exogenous shocks, continuing
its path development relying on the internal sources of stability and sustained by the contagion dynamics.

Conclusion

Since 1999, the G20, BRICS and SCO have institutionalised robustly in distinctive but increasingly similar, converging and cumulatively influential ways. They have together become central to global governance, as relative capability has shifted towards their common, core, non-western members of China, Russia and India, as new, shared, non-state shocks have soared, as the old multilateral organisations have increasingly failed in response, and as these three countries and their partners have applied the lessons learnt in one institution to build the others in dynamic, largely cooperative ways.

The G20, BRICS and SCO share the principles and procedures of consensus, flexibility, volunteerism, relatively low bureaucracy, extensive communication and intensive informal contacts among officials, transnational engagement groups and, above all, their leaders at their increasing individual summits by 2021. These dynamics facilitate strategic interaction, respect state autonomy, reinforce state capacity, generate and harness information, speed up decision making, and minimise bureaucratic transaction costs. Their summit commitments, while not legally binding, have been implemented through peer pressure and external stimuli to an increasing degree. As a result, the performance of the G20, BRICS and SCO has broadened and improved. Together they have made global governance more inclusive and effective.

The G20 has led these contagion dynamics by incorporating all major BRICS and key SCO members and guests and involving more major multilateral organisations in a broad spectrum of governing functions and policy domains. Extended contagion came from the integration of non-G20 members and transnational engagement groups, enhancing the G20’s effectiveness, legitimacy and leadership role (Slaughter 2020). Its premier role in the global governance architecture is reflected in the reiterated commitments and support of the G20 goals and decisions by the BRICS and the G7. But the G20 does not govern as the hierarchical superior of the component G7 or BRICS, let alone the overlapping SCO, but joins all more equally in an expanding network of global summit governance.

The BRICS, created as a dialogue and policy coordination platform, has matured into a transcontinental governance mechanism with a comprehensive political, security, economic and social issues agenda. The BRICS’s contagion dynamics, although involving fewer multilateral organisations than the G20, have been stronger with engagement groups and outreach countries, pioneered by Russia and South Africa and consolidated by each presidency in its distinctive way. The BRICS has relied more on its own deepening institution, even in the COVID-19 pandemic years, thus demonstrating that the BRICS had become the peoples’ institution and a platform for knowledge generation and inter-civilisational dialogue. However, its smaller membership, principle of moving forward only on issues acceptable to all members and refusal to impose decisions on other international institutions have limited its
global leadership performance. Still, despite tensions among them, members have used the forum to coordinate positions, deepen intra-BRICS cooperation and inter-civilisational dialogue, facilitate bilateral relations, and promote their role in global governance as a group.

The SCO’s expanding regional contagion dynamics feature the addition of four observer states and six dialogue partners. Its formal and expanding cooperation with regional and international organisations has focused primarily on security and stability, fighting terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational organised crime. The involvement of multilateral organisations, its Business Council and the SCO Forum has remained limited. The SCO has helped fill the gap in knowledge generation, strategic interaction, agreement facilitation and institutional creation on regional security, despite severe tensions among key members, but not in the economic and social domains.

Thus, this article contributes distinctively to the literature on international institutions in several ways.

First, it is the first analysis to examine the major PSIs of the G20, BRICS and SCO together. Although several major works have analysed the G20 and BRICS separately and together and even extended their treatment to embrace APEC, this article treats the G20, BRICS and SCO as a trilogy, with the SCO being a geographically regional body whose leading members are also influential non-western members of the global G20 and BRICS.

Second, this article analyses these three institutions comparatively, according to a common framework, composed of their institutional development and central dimensions of performance. On this foundation, it treats them interactively, focusing on how each has interacted with and influenced the others, especially through the visions and initiatives of their common, non-western members of China, India and Russia. It considers them, not only according to the standard categories of cooperators or competitors, but also according to their cumulative effect, each adding value where and when the others fails, to produce a better governed world.

Third, from this analysis, this article challenges the view that these three institutions, alone and together, have been in decline, since their influential early days, in today’s ‘G-zero’ world defined by globalisation and its ensuing nationalism, by growing geopolitical competition brought by the rise of China and decline of the US, and the erosion of the multilateral rules based order pioneered by the US and its western allies in 1944–1945. Rather, it shows that each of these three newer bodies have individually continued to grow in their institutionalisation and influence, and in their cumulative impact on global governance as a whole. It thus suggests that the rising non-western major powers, led by China and India, can successfully share power with the established western incumbents led by the US, Japan and their G7 partners, in ways that could eventually cope with genuinely global common threats such as COVID-19 and climate change.

Fourth, these analytical and empirical innovations flow from a much wider review and use of literature than the usual reliance on leading western scholarly ones. This article mobilises the material and insights from regional journals, non-scholarly but nonetheless sound sources, and their non-western authors, especially in regard to the SCO. It thus offers an innovative look at their view of the existing world order, and
how they seek through international institution building to conceptualise and create ones more comfortable for themselves.

Fifth, within historical and rational choice institutionalist perspectives the article shows that the members’ initial institutional choices and benefits produced by the decisions made at the first summits defined the G20, BRICS and SCO development dynamic and unique nature, created norms, solutions, internal cooperation mechanisms, communication procedures, outreach networks and patterns of engagement with international institutions, which became endogenous sources of stability and influenced the members’ subsequent behaviour. These factors were consolidated, expanded and reinforced in ongoing loops, sustained by the contagion flows and acted as factors of resilience against internal pressures and external shocks. But they also constrained the capacity of the G20, BRICS and SCO to innovate in response to the triple pandemic, economic and social crisis since 2020.

Although these innovations leave much to be developed and applied, several contributions stand out. This article shows that in the twenty-first century, international institutions work, in their largely informal, plurilateral form, wherever they were invented, from the western world in Washington DC through the non-western world in Yekaterinburg or Shanghai. They work for the rising non-western world and thus for the relatively declining established, democratic, western one. They can thus work, in their cumulative impact, for the whole world together as it confronts pandemics, such as COVID-19, and the genuinely existential threat of climate change.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of both authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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