

Moreover, the implicit definition of “success” that Tepperman employs is a little slippery. At times, that definition seems to require only overcoming gridlock—whatever results, so long as the gridlock is broken, counts as a victory. Sometimes that leads to a backward argument in which the solving of a problem is retconned into the story about leadership that *The Fix* wants to tell.

Some (not me) would object to viewing the United States’s shale boom (Chapter 7) as a success when viewed in public-policy terms; my concern is more in the fact that hydraulic fracturing and exploitation of shale resources came about because of the great difficulty in regulating the U.S. energy sector, which allowed innovative practices to overturn entrenched interests. Tepperman fineses the point by focusing on energy executives, but that diagnosis results more from a leader-centric approach than the fundamental permissive conditions most relevant to the case. Sometimes, gridlock and policy failure can be dealt with most effectively by choosing to restrict the discretionary authority of political institutions—structural, not idiosyncratic, fixes often matter most.

The conceptual slippage of “success” combines with the focus on leaders most dramatically in the section on Rwanda. Tepperman presents the country’s postgenocide experience as a success story. Indeed, in many ways (especially economically), it is: The country experienced an apocalypse but it has climbed back from the lowest levels of hell. But the story is not quite so simple. Tepperman credits President Paul Kagame with engendering the country’s rebirth by “embracing the politics of satisfaction.” This is a commonplace view of Kagame, but it occludes both Kagame’s own role in the civil war-cum-genocide of the early 1990s and a balanced assessment of what Rwanda is really like today. Not all leaders who break gridlocks do so for the best. Kagame has not brought justice or reconciliation so much as he has imposed a victor’s peace. That is a less optimistic story but a more accurate one.

Despite such caveats, the book proves to be a useful inspiration and foil. Perhaps most important, it shows that the difference between a badly broken political system and a healthy one can be pretty small—an election victory, a leader’s temperament, the right strategy being proposed. At a time when the United States feels as if it is on the wrong side of that calculation, *The Fix* reminds us that the corrective to hyperpartisanship, executive dysfunction, and corrosive political cultures might be more technical than revolutionary.

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BRICS: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

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Considering how significant the BRICS grouping has become for international politics, it is remarkable how few books there are on the subject. A quick search for “BRICS” on Amazon still leads mostly to expensive suitcases and handbags, while analyses on emerging powers appear only on the following pages. The majority of books about the BRICS are written by economists who assess their future growth potential, without taking the political dimension into account. Those that do take the political aspects into considerations speak mostly to academic readers, not the general observer in search of a broad overview. In this context, Andrew F. Cooper’s very short introduction on the BRICS grouping indeed fills an important niche, providing a solid overview that can be read in a few hours and includes all the basic information. The book therefore does not compete with more academic and in-depth analyses of the subject, but aims to reach a broader readership. The book may therefore be regarded as a success of Oxford University Press’s Very

Short Introduction Series, which often serves as the first—and only—analysis readers will read to gain a broad understanding of the topic. As the BRICS grouping is moving into its most interesting phase—that of consolidation and institutionalization—demand for BRICS-related analyses is set to grow.

Contrary to most work produced by U.S. academics or policy makers on the subject, Cooper offers a balanced view of the grouping. He acknowledges that mainstream observers have failed to take the BRICS seriously, yet he also says defining the group remains a challenge. He says the BRICS are “moving beyond past models,” suggesting that one should not try to find historical analogies to the grouping. It may be unavoidable that one very common but ultimately empty criticism appears early on in the book: the argument that the BRICS are too different and thus should not form a club. Paradoxically, the most common example is size: China’s economy is bigger than that of all the other BRICS countries combined, so China should not be part of the grouping, the argument goes. This overlooks that common economic size plays absolutely no role in assuring successful cooperation—as the G7, which consists of member countries with very different economies—shows. Who would ever argue that the United States should leave the G7 because it is much bigger than the rest? In this particular case, as in a few others, Cooper could have gone beyond a rather neutral stance and call out the lack of logic in many analysts’ unwarranted criticism of the grouping. In the same way, when comparing the BRICS grouping to the G7, Cooper points to many intra-BRICS rivalries, but does not mention that there are many squabbles between G7 members as well. Germany and Italy, for example, are fundamentally opposed when it comes to UN Security Council reform, yet that does not lead analysts to question the G7.

BRICS: A Very Short Introduction includes an analysis of the multitude of intra-BRICS meetings that now take place throughout the year. This is laudable, as the vast majority of commentators never bother to analyze them in detail. In his analysis, Cooper says that despite a proliferation of activities including society representatives, the meetings “did not alter the basic relationship between state and society concern the operation of the summits.” While that is true—the summits are a purely state-centric affair—he may be setting the bar unfairly high. After all, which other informal gathering, such as the G7 or the G20, was able to seriously include the voices of nonstate actors?

Even those who view the BRICS favorably will agree, however, with Cooper’s point that despite all the rhetoric, BRICS member countries do not necessarily see the grouping as a key strategic priority: The Sherpas indicated by each country usually do not have the political clout their counterparts at the G20 possess. It is equally surprising to see how few diplomats countries like Brazil or South Africa assign to work exclusively on BRICS-related issues.

Above all, however, Cooper strikes a reassuring note to worried readers in Washington: “There is little evidence,” he says, “that the BRICS members are committed to any revisionist collective action that would challenge the fundamental character of the post-1945 system.” Rather, the focus so far has been on hedging and institutional maintenance rather than “hard balancing.” Considering the benefits the BRICS derive from the status quo, that is unlikely to change soon.

In the end, the author—rightly—explains why the BRICS grouping will live on, even though growth rates are no longer as high as they used to be. It is precisely the looseness in form that bestows the BRICS its staying power, he argues. Indeed, it would be unrealistic for five major countries, located in different regions of the world, each with its own complexities, to impose binding rules on each other. Still, Cooper says, “although the transformative effect of the BRICS can be overblown, both its symbolic and operational role in the diffusion of authority in the 21st century global system should not be underestimated.”

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