

# **BRICS+: Reshaping Global Power or Stuck in Its Own Divides?**

## **Introduction**

The association of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, and South Africa (BRICS) travelled from the world of fiction to an institutional reality in 2009, with these four countries coming together. Two years later, South Africa joined this poster group of the developing world. Currently occupying a commanding position in the world economy with seven new entrants (Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Indonesia), the BRICS share in the world's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity terms increased from 28.9 per cent (2009) to 35.4 per cent (2024) with that of G7 falling from 34.9 per cent (2009) to 29.6 per cent (2024).<sup>1</sup> Home to half of the world's population in 25.0 percent of the world's land area—BRICS+ account for 2/5<sup>th</sup> of global trade and 1/4<sup>th</sup> of global GDP.<sup>2</sup>

## **Internal Contradictions: Unity or Fragmentation**

BRICS suffers from a 'deep cleavage' between authoritarian and democratic states. With China and Russia as 'Leading' states within the bloc, three out of six new entrants are not democracies. Despite the group's focus on catering to the emerging market and developing economies, the strengthening of participatory and responsive democratic institutions has not been an important membership criterion. The original founding members Brazil, Russia, China, and India (and South Africa later) are not an obvious set. Their internal politics and economics are dissimilar. Each of the four embodies distinct cultural and linguistic traditions.<sup>3</sup> But this view confirms a sanitised Euro-centric homogenisation derived from an inordinate insistence on alliance building, thriving on commonalities that tend to cover differences and do not acknowledge each of these states' unique selling proposition and strategic priorities. New-age mini laterals, in contrast, sustain partnerships based on a narrow band of shared interests and values. In the case of BRICS+, this narrow focus centres on advancing a Global South-led version of global reordering. By advocating 'competitive multilateralism', BRICS+ chooses ad hoc and issue-based synergies and does not develop a 'parallel order'.

## **Economic and Strategic Impact: BRICS+ as a Driving Force for the Global South**

As an 'engine of growth,' BRICS+ offer a formidable alternative or supplement to traditional markets' investment opportunities and growth prospects. West retains economic preponderance, but United States' companies must train their current and future managers to compete with firms in BRICS.<sup>4</sup> Some major manufacturing and low to mid-level service supply chains have already shifted to Asian subregions becoming a political and economic grievance of the Western electorate. BRICS countries individually weathered the 2008 financial crisis that battered most of the Western world and came together a year later. Their economic clout has gained political mileage too. Despite cyclical booms and slowdowns, the inherent dynamism of fast-growing economies is aided by self-confidence and peer strength from the Global South.

BRICS has successfully fathered two multilateral economic organisations—the New Development Bank and Contingency Reserve Arrangement in view of the unmet sustainable financing needs of the developing. Since the first summit, multilateral reforms have been a cornerstone of key BRICS demands for improving the lot of developing countries. With the dominance of Big Four Currencies waning and bilateral currency swaps (Yuan-Rouble trade to bypass sanctions) gaining strength, claims that BRICS+ can articulate a constructive alternative agenda to become entrepreneurs have gained prominence. A case in point is the coordination of national positions on the implementation of Responsibility to Protect in the Syrian and Libyan crises to sanction multilateral interventions in failed regimes.

It is a moot point whether BRICS+ possess the capacity to amend the global world order as it lacks internal coherence and strategic unity to discuss and defend key common goals beyond mere rhetoric. In an economic sense, this diversity makes BRICS economies complementary, and there is great potential for increasing cooperation (...), and BRICS could develop into a trading block. Another thing that connects all the BRICS members in spite of their diversity is the fact that they have all turned their backs on the western path to modernisation. They all have chosen their own path towards modern society.<sup>5</sup>

And yet geopolitical divides are hard to bridge with several members locked in the opposing sides of their regional chess boards (China-India; Saudi Arabia-Iran). BRICS is already an institution representing some emerging states. But whether it also

indicates trust between the members so that they are capable of collective action remains to be seen. To survive as an institution, BRICS should also be flexible enough to minimise intra-coalition frictions.<sup>6</sup> The only thing that seems to unite BRICS is its non-westernism and not anti-westernism, to paraphrase Dr S Jaishankar's comments on Indian participation in BRICS.

### **A Unique Diplomatic Approach**

BRICS is guided by 'Relational Multilateralism', a concept which includes a preference for consensual decision-making, voluntary engagement, a strictly realist perspective on national sovereignty, and the absence of legally binding clauses.<sup>7</sup> The flexibility afforded to members to pursue strategic autonomy by even aligning with the west where alignment of interests is quite evident—as India is a part of BRICS and the Quadrilateral Dialogue. In fact, many BRICS members come from a long tradition of pursuing anti-block politics in the Cold War in a non-aligned set-up. This informal grouping then reflects more of a partnership on common political, security, and trade issues as a heterogeneous coalition of parties to erode the Western hegemonic claims<sup>8</sup> BRICS nations as the leaders of Global South display a sense of entitlement which makes them articulate their visions with a sense of naturalness that often baffles Western observers. The underlying message is: We should have a key role in global affairs not because of what we do, but who we are<sup>9</sup>

Laidi maintains that BRICS is a defensive rather than offensive coalition as it merely offers a critique of the existing order and places members' demands of respecting territorial sovereignty, independence, seeking peace and sustainable economic growth—all within the Euro-centric Westphalian system.<sup>10</sup> It eschews concrete proposals for alternative solutions to whether entrenched geopolitical quagmires like West Asia or global emergencies like climate change—even as talks of a BRICS currency seems to be fizzling out. This vision of anti-westernism then seems a political troupe to make incremental gains and slowly build comparative power with hegemonic structures. The West is overrepresented in international institutions and lacks the will or mandate to maintain an unrepresentative 'rules-based international order'. Further, the guardians have themselves bent the 'rules' innumerable times, so much so that it does not take a Trump administration to dismantle the global governance architecture.

This Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity world further entrenches the security dilemma's, and emerging countries especially face this heat and cope by transitioning into 'Sovereignty Hawks' by simultaneously leveraging globalisation and preserving their domestic socio-political-economic systems.<sup>11</sup> BRICS is not a revolutionary but a reformist organisation merely seeking a seat at the table as a matter of right—they have benefitted greatly from globalisation and multilateralism—and yet have been denied their justified place. Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, the rapporteur of the 2012 European Union's BRICS Report, argued that BRICS has sought to remedy this by 'soft balancing' against western hegemonic institutionalism, which is more of a conservative posturing than substantive positions on military and security matters. And yet BRICS have been coordinating their meetings in margins of major summits, offering joint statements and positions in international fora. An example was the implementation of a no-fly zone over Libya through UNSC Resolution 1973. Consultations in human security have trickled in—for instance, a joint strategy to eradicate tuberculosis, a BRICS medical journal and a medical association.

## **Conclusion**

Despite pessimistic prognostications by Western observers, the clamour for BRICS membership is a sign enough of its vitality and potentiality to reshape the global political and economic landscape. The growing BRICS+ gives emerging markets the opportunity to align on global topics and new economic opportunities.<sup>12</sup> The annual BRICS Summits span coverage from technology, finance, energy, and development to climate issues. Second-order institutions like the BRICS Think Tank Council, Digital Economy Working Group, Payment Task Force, and BRICS Business Council also deepen multi-track diplomatic engagements.

A stronger BRICS+ has some of the largest energy producers and buyers who can stabilise the global markets by coordinated action in times of crisis. It could also strengthen intra-BRICS trade links by signing free trade agreements and building supply chain links. Further, the National Development Bank has only marginally supplemented International Monetary Fund and World Bank's role as premier lending institutions and can further percolate infrastructure and development financing initiatives in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. Lastly, there are ample opportunities for scientific cooperation in artificial intelligence, digitalisation, space, and healthcare

innovation for bridging the tech access gap in the developing world. Overall, BRICS+ has much potential to usher in a more equitable and just global order.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Boston Consulting Group. 2024. "BRICS Enlargement and the Shifting World Order." *Boston Consulting Group*. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/brics-enlargement-and-shifting-world-order>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Armijo, L. E. (2007). THE BRICS COUNTRIES (BRAZIL, RUSSIA, INDIA, AND CHINA) AS ANALYTICAL CATEGORY: MIRAGE OR INSIGHT? *Asian Perspective*, 31(4), 7–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42704607>

<sup>4</sup> Jain, S.C., (2006) ed., *Emerging Economies and the Transformation of International Business* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar)

<sup>5</sup> Kupchan, C. A. (2012), *No One's World. The West, The Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> KÄKÖNEN, J. (2014). BRICS AS A NEW POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS? *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 6(2), 85–104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26805954>

<sup>7</sup> Ujvari, B. (2015). *BRICS bloc(k) rising?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06761>

<sup>8</sup> Laidi, Zaki (2011), "The BRICS Against the West?" CERI Strategy Papers 11, Hors Série, November.

<sup>9</sup> Stuenkel O., 'Interview: Why the BRICS Will Remain an Important Force in World Affairs in 2015 and Beyond', *Post-Western World* (blog), 17 March 2015. Accessed February 18, 2025

<sup>10</sup> Laidi, Zaki (2011), "The BRICS Against the West?" CERI Strategy Papers 11, Hors Série, November.

<sup>11</sup> van Ham, P. (2015). The BRICS as a Security Challenge in Multilateral Forums. In *The BRICS as an EU Security Challenge: The Case for Conservatism* (pp. 10–27). Clingendael Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05558.5>

<sup>12</sup> Boston Consulting Group. "An Evolving BRICS and the Shifting World Order." *Boston Consulting Group*, April 29, 2024. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/brics-enlargement-and-shifting-world-order>

**Elma Naaz** is currently working as a Research Intern with CS3, USI. Her area of interest is Geopolitics and Climate Change.

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