

## THE GLOBAL REACH OF THE BRICS

Written by Thomas Edwards

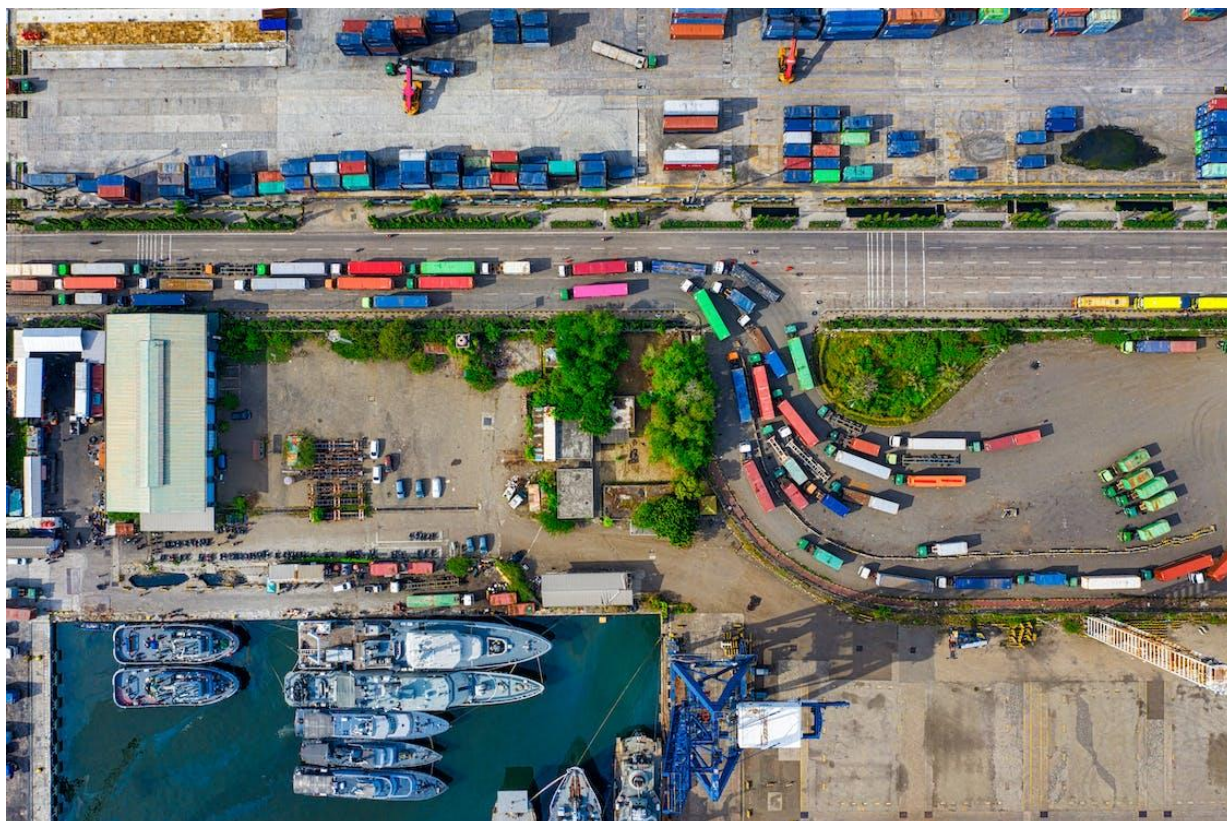


Figure 1 Though remaining somewhat disappointing, intra-BRICS trade is nevertheless growing, owing primarily to the inclusion of China as a member of the BRICS. Source: Tom Fisk, Pexels, Available from: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/high-angle-shot-of-colorful-trucks-2226457/>

## Introduction

The politico-economic grouping colloquially referred to as the BRICS, originally comprising the states of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has grown from a purely economic typology in 2001,<sup>1</sup> to a diplomatic and far more overtly political grouping since 2009,<sup>2</sup> with serious international weight. Indeed, the expanded group, after the official announcement that Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are now part of an enlarged BRICS,<sup>3</sup> now accounts for around 45% of the world's population,<sup>4</sup> alongside representing over a quarter of global GDP.<sup>5</sup> Before analysing this significant enlargement, this report outlines the background and development of the group in its original form, investigates the aims of the group, will explore the inherent tensions found in such a diverse ensemble of nations, before closing with a brief analysis of the role of the BRICS in Africa and the consequences for the global status quo.

Since coining the term BRIC in 2001 the original economic categorisation has 'morphed into a political and diplomatic project with important implications for the broader international system,'<sup>6</sup> increasingly challenging the Western-led G7 and seeking to bring into being a more multipolar world.

Indeed, it is arguably a collective sense of grievance<sup>7</sup> with the current global division of power (closely correlated to the dissatisfaction with the unipolarity of the USA), which unites the BRICS, with all members, both old and new, seeking a greater role on the world stage. This striving for multipolarity has gained greater salience with the most recent expansion of the BRICS, forcing the West to acknowledge the group's influence, and making this analysis of the global reach of the BRICS both important and highly salient as more and more states seek concessions from the West in regard to the current configuration of the division of power within global bodies. As will be made clear, the West can no longer ignore these growing demands, closely tied to the increasing international weight of the BRICS in light of their expansion.

## Background and Development

The BRIC grouping of nations (becoming BRICS in 2010 with the addition of South Africa), were just one of a number of acronyms coined during the early 2000s, to group growing economic states together, with the BRICS joining the N11 (Next eleven: Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, and Vietnam), MINTs (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey), and CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa).

Amongst this plethora of acronyms, the BRICS are unique in their development in that they have morphed from an economic to a *political* grouping and have codified this transition through official summits and communiqués, unlike other economic groupings mentioned. Indeed, the author of the BRICS acronym, Goldman Sachs's Jim O'Neill developed the term when observing the purely *economic* shared traits of the original four BRIC states, never envisioning anything like the political grouping that they have become today. Ever since the states' leaders met informally at the sidelines of the G8 in Toyako, Japan, the speed of which the group has developed (from inaugurating annual summits, developing a joint counter-terrorism strategy, to even contemplating a currency union), has characterised the BRICS uniqueness as an politico-economic union.

These meetings eventually transitioned to the formal summits that have come to define the BRICS, and which helped to catalyse the creation of the G20, expanded from the G8, due to the demands for greater global institutional representation, (a core aim of the BRICS). From the first official summit meeting in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009, such summits have become a trademark of the group. The summits are a physical manifestation of the group's unity in which cooperation is prioritised over meaningful debate, despite the often-numerous contentious conflicts that arise and continue to arise between the BRICS. Such conflict is never allowed to be publicly aired however during such summits, with an easily recognisable 'critique taboo'<sup>8</sup> in evidence within the wording of the communiqués. Consensus between the BRICS is consequently

---

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, J. (2001). Building better global economic BRICs. *Global Economics Paper Series* (No. 66)

<sup>2</sup> Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015

<sup>3</sup> Anon. 2024. South Africa says five countries confirm they are joining BRICS. *Reuters*.

<sup>4</sup> Anon. 2024. Brics: What is the group and which countries have joined? *BBC NEWS*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Brosig, Malte. 2021

artificially magnified, even in times of inter-BRIC conflict. This was most visible during the 2017 BRICS summit in Xiamen, China, during which the on-going Sino-Indian border conflict was omitted and never referred to, despite the intense media coverage in both states.<sup>9</sup>

The pageantry of such summits masks the informality and lack of formal structure that is a distinguishing feature of the group, especially when compared to other international bodies. The BRICS possesses no headquarters, secretariat, nor a codified official hierarchy, unlike those embedded within the EU.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the best method for comprehending the structure of the BRICS is recognising what they are not, namely, a formal alliance. Instead, this informality of the group is a deliberate design feature,<sup>11</sup> with the annual summits arguably delighting more in spectacle than substance, with all contention within the group consciously downplayed. This can also be seen in the communiqués presented during each summit, in which, as recognised by Cooper (2016), the wording “subordinates national differences to core commonalities of perspective, emphasising converging interests and minimising points of tension and disagreement.”<sup>12</sup> Whether this prioritising of consensus at all costs is a weakness of the grouping, papering over the cracks that exist between member states such as those of China and India, or is in fact a strength of the group, especially when contrasted to the divisions evident amongst Western-led organisations and alliances.

Regardless of this preference for consensus over internal debate, the BRICS nonetheless regularly convene meetings (over 100 per year)<sup>13</sup> in which a range of more substantive subjects are discussed, further exemplifying the political nature of the group. Overall, the summitry of the BRICS, both the spectacle and regularity, displays the diplomatic aspect of the group, proving it is much more than a mere economic categorisation. Though the communiqués that result from the summits tend towards insipidness, (such as the 2013 eThekweni Declaration which declared an aim towards ‘building a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity,’<sup>14</sup> arguably a very platitudinal statement) due to the conscious paving over of all inter-BRICS conflict, the summits nonetheless display a strong level of unity.

Whereas the summits have presented a homogenous and aligned group of nations, inter-BRICS trade between the original five members remains disappointing, remaining a modest 6-10%<sup>15</sup> amongst BRICS and this level is mostly owing to the presence of China, the key trading partner of the other BRICS.<sup>16</sup> Crucial, however, is the fact that although small, it is nevertheless growing, having increased by an astonishing \$249 billion between 2002 and 2012,<sup>17</sup> and continues to grow apace.<sup>18</sup>

That being said, there are potential pitfalls to inter-BRICS trade, unsubtly alluded to at the most recent BRICS summit in Johannesburg by Indian Prime Minister Modi, who stated a need for “resilient and inclusive supply chains,” interpreted as a call to reduce dependence on China,<sup>19</sup> India’s largest trading partner.<sup>20</sup> Another characteristic which complicates trade amongst the BRICS is the differing natures of the states’ economies (a complication which also threatens the BRICS collective vision, as will be shown), with India and China net-importing energy consumers,<sup>21</sup> while Russia and Brazil are energy exporters.<sup>22</sup> This impacts the collective economic vision of the BRICS, with China and India naturally seeking low Brent crude oil prices, with Brazil, and especially Russia, seeking the precise opposite. This consequently affects the economic demands of the BRICS, which is further complicated with the addition of the oil-producing Saudi-

---

<sup>9</sup> Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021

<sup>10</sup> Downie, Christian. 2015

<sup>11</sup> Brosig, Malte. 2021

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>13</sup> Brosig, Malte. 2021

<sup>14</sup> Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016; see also Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023

<sup>16</sup> Miller, Manjari Chatterjee. 2021; see also Brosig, Malte. 2021

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>18</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023

<sup>19</sup> Mohan, C. Raja. 2023

<sup>20</sup> Miller, Manjari Chatterjee. 2021

<sup>21</sup> Downie, Christian. 2015

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

Arabia, Iran, and UAE, which together produce around 44% of the world's crude oil.<sup>23</sup> Tellingly, there has yet to be a BRICS free trade agreement,<sup>24</sup> despite the BRICS coming to fruition back in 2009.

Overall, the BRICS have developed far beyond Jim O' Neill's economic grouping to the diplomatic association that the BRICS have become today, a transformation that O' Neill never envisaged for the group. Taking this history into account, it is worth asking how the group will continue to develop and change in the next decade, and how its collective outlook will be shaped by its recently accepted new states.

## Aims

While their economies may be diverse, what unites the BRICS is their desire for greater global institutional representation. This applies as much to the original five members as it does to the newly added member states. To this end, the BRICS achieved a visible achievement with the expansion of the G8 to the G20 in 2008, led largely by growing calls from the BRICS states for greater global institutional representation. The G20 has now superseded the G8 as the 'foremost economic policy forum,'<sup>25</sup> in the world, and although the group is, due to its greater diversity, often unable to reach meaningful consensus, (a trait seen already within the BRICS), it now rightfully reflects the more multipolar world of 2024.

The BRICS can, on analysis, be assessed to have done very well in realising their stated aims. Of their 15 initial commitments codified during the first BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg in 2009, to the 125 pledges made during the summit in Xiamenan (2017), an impressive 77% have been met.<sup>26</sup> This means that the BRICS are, in regards to compliance with their stated aims, comparable to their Western counterpart, the G7.<sup>27</sup> This is all the more impressive when considering the diversity of the BRICS compared to the more uniform liberal democracies of the G7.

Achieving greater institutional representation for the BRICS is closely related to their aim of realising multipolarity, defined as a world with multiple great powers, as opposed to the current unipolar configuration with the US as the world's sole superpower. The rise of China has been one of the defining global phenomenon of the 21st century, and one can observe that this enhances the power and influence of the BRICS. Though China and Russia have most explicitly called for a more multipolar global order, all BRICS states' foreign policies seek multipolarity<sup>28</sup>, both for the original BRICS and those states who have recently ascended to the group, though for differing reasons.

In this way, the BRICS have increasingly been seen as a counterweight to US hegemony, most notably for China, which has cast the US as its antithesis in foreign policy matters. This policy preference by China has had serious repercussions for the rest of the BRICS, seen most clearly in China's nominations of the new additions to the BRICS, which some have described as leading to a more anti-Western oriented BRICS grouping, and thus further removed from its economic and a-political origins. Though accepting many of the tenets of the Western-led international system,<sup>29</sup> the BRICS have nevertheless served 'as an alternative, if inchoate, effort to push back against the hegemon of the day.'<sup>30</sup> As with the Bandung conference of 1955, which saw the creation of the non-aligned movement,<sup>31</sup> the BRICS are an attractive grouping to many in the Global South, acting as they do as an alternative to the West, which, rightly or wrongly, continues to possess the connotations of colonialism. This was witnessed most recently in the ant-French sentiment in post-coup African states, and the corresponding displays of admiration for the BRICS state Russia.<sup>32</sup>

What a multipolar world would look like in practise remains unclear, and as with the BRICS communiqués, the call for multipolarity remains just that at present, though the recent additions to the BRICS can be seen as an endorsement and tacit approval of realising a more multipolar world. What is clear, however, is that the BRICS, especially in their expanded form, will participate in this more multipolar world, perhaps offering a

---

<sup>23</sup> Anon. 2024. Brics: What is the group and which countries have joined?

<sup>24</sup> Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021

<sup>25</sup> Beattie, Alan. 2023

<sup>26</sup> S.J.C. 2018

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015

<sup>29</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>31</sup> Gramer, Robbie., and Lu, Christina. 2023

<sup>32</sup> Inwood, Joe., and Tacchi, Jake. 2024

'third way'<sup>33</sup> for states looking to counter-balance the Western-led global order. This, however, is not to cast the BRICS as necessarily anti-Western, nor aligned overtly against the US. Indeed, India has largely employed its continued membership of the BRICS as a method to contain the hegemonic tendencies of China as much as of the United States and seeks to counter-balance its northern neighbour just as much as that of the West.<sup>34</sup>

Hand in hand with the desire for a more multipolar world is the BRICS' quest for de-dollarisation,<sup>35</sup> a 'multipolar' currency world<sup>36</sup> in which the primacy of the US dollar as the world's reserve currency is increasingly circumnavigated. Such measures have already begun. Brazil and Argentina now utilise the Renminbi when trading with China,<sup>37</sup> with the recently joined BRICS member Saudi Arabia also announcing that it will commence invoicing parts of its oil exports to China in renminbi as well.<sup>38</sup> Not only does this make implementing Western sanctions more taxing but is evident of a greater multipolar trend in the world.

The new nation states that have joined the BRICS are conscious that dependence on the dollar increases the cost of debt when the dollar rises during times of economic crises. This is especially true for Egypt and Ethiopia, (both of whom have also joined the expanded BRICS), who have been negatively impacted by high US interest rates.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Ethiopia is highly exposed to potential US sanctions due to its ongoing civil war, and thus seeks, as with Iran, to trade in local currencies. As with other BRICS, Egypt has recently agreed to use local currencies when trading with China, Russia, and India.<sup>40</sup> Such news is likely to be received positively from Russia's perspective, owing to it being the most sanctioned BRICS state, though it must be recognised that de-dollarisation remains an aim rather than a fulfilment, with the BRICS New Development Bank still relying on US dollars as its primary currency.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 2 De-dollarisation is a shared aim of the BRICS, though remains just that with the dollar still the main currency used by the BRICS New Development Bank. Source: Karolina Grabowska, Pexels, Available from: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/high-angle-shot-of-colorful-trucks-2226457/>

Lastly, a key aim of the group has been to enhance infrastructure across the five BRICS. The BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), set up in 2014, can be seen as the most tangible success to date that 'cements the BRICS as a political entity'<sup>42</sup> rather than a mere economic typology. With its headquarters in Shanghai,

---

<sup>33</sup> Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021

<sup>34</sup> Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021

<sup>35</sup> Osborn, Catherine. 2023

<sup>36</sup> Tett, Gillian. 2023

<sup>37</sup> Gramer, Robbie., and Lu, Christina. 2023

<sup>38</sup> Tett, Gillian. 2023

<sup>39</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Adler, Nils. 2023

<sup>42</sup> Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021

and regional offices in both Johannesburg and São Paulo,<sup>43</sup> the bank seeks to model itself as an alternative to the Western-centric World Bank. It is yet another institution that contributes to multipolarity, seeking as it does to 'facilitate 30 percent of lending in local currencies by 2026.'<sup>44</sup>

Of all the various aims and endeavours the BRICS are working towards, the NDB is arguably the group's greatest success. So far, the bank has lent almost \$33 billion in loans to facilitate close to 100 infrastructure projects across the five member states.<sup>45</sup> Evidence of its attractiveness is that numerous other states have joined the bank, including the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bangladesh<sup>46</sup>; Saudi-Arabia has also indicated its interest in becoming the bank's ninth member.<sup>47</sup> Despite this interest, it must be noted that the bank's collective resources are dwarfed when compared to China's bilateral loans. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has reportedly lent \$1trillion.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, though consciously seeking to lend in local currencies, the bank has not been immune to Western-backed sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, with it ceasing to fund Russian infrastructure projects in order to demonstrate compliance with Western-initiated sanctions.<sup>49</sup>

Tellingly for the likelihood of success towards de-dollarization is the forecast that the BRICS in their enlarged form will see an 85% surge in their millionaire count over the next decade.<sup>50</sup>, far exceeding any other group of nations. By comparison, the G7 is forecast an increase of just by 45% over the same period. Whether this is evidence of the probability that de-dollarisation will be realised or is simply indicative of the economic success of the BRICS, either way it is clear that a shift in power from the West towards the BRICS is in progress.

### Internal Tensions

While many of the aims of the BRICS have been realised, there remains, nonetheless, numerous internal tensions and contradictions within the group. Most prominent of these is the imbalance of power exerted by China vis-à-vis the other BRICS states. Indeed, in almost all categories China remains an outlier, possessing a GDP greater than the other BRICS states combined.<sup>51</sup> This is true even with the recent expansion of the group, with China alone representing more than 70% of the bloc's combined GDP.<sup>52</sup>

The economy of Shanghai alone is greater than that of South Africa's,<sup>53</sup> with China's economy, from 2008-2013, growing at double the rate of the four other original BRICS. This has led some to view China as a 'super-BRICS' member,<sup>54</sup> dominating its fellow BRICS in a multitude of criteria, and leading some to allege that the BRICS are heavily 'lopsided.'<sup>55</sup> The implications of China's asymmetry within the BRICS calls into question to what extent the BRICS could fall under the tutelage of China, and thus grow more anti-Western in its nature.<sup>56</sup> The extent of China's asymmetry when compared to the other BRICS asks the question as to why China is a member of the group at all, as 'China needs the grouping much less than the BRICS need China.'<sup>57</sup> The answer to this lies in the legitimacy China is afforded in its own unilateral aims by being part of a larger institution. This is all the more important as China repeatedly comes into conflict with the US. Indeed, 'without the US as an antithesis in Chinese grand strategy, it is inconceivable that BRICS would have retained such prominence for Beijing.'<sup>58</sup> By couching their aims as part of the wider aims of the BRICS, China's quest for a more multipolar world appears more legitimate in the West, and more attractive to the Global South, as opposed to seeking Chinese hegemony, a more *general* multipolarity appears as the

---

<sup>43</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016

<sup>44</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023

<sup>45</sup> Leahy, Joe., and Alim, Arjun Neil. 2023

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Bennon, Michael., and Fukuyama, Francis. 2023

<sup>49</sup> Leahy, Joe., and Alim, Arjun Neil. 2023

<sup>50</sup> Shan, Lee Ying. 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>52</sup> Plummer, Robert. 2023

<sup>53</sup> Brosig, Malte. 2021

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>55</sup> Beattie, Alan. 2023

<sup>56</sup> Osborn, Catherine. 2023; see also Beattie, Alan. 2023

<sup>57</sup> Downie, Christian. 2015

<sup>58</sup> Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021

BRICS aim. Evidence of this method is apparent with the enlargement of the BRICS, which many have identified as altering the character of the BRICS to that of a quasi-Chinese-led alliance.<sup>59</sup>

While China can be said to be atypical due to its dominant economic position within the BRICS, Russia, too, can be viewed as an anomaly within the group due to reverse reasons, being judged as a declining force across a wide range of metrics. This is especially true when compared to the other BRICS. Even before Russia's disastrous invasion of Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions, Russia was seen as a 'legacy power,'<sup>60</sup> rather than a rising power, as other BRICS have been categorised, and was recently in terminal decline, a state 'attempting to stop the bleeding.'<sup>61</sup> Compared with the dynamism and growth of China and India, Russia stands out as a 'perennial outsider.'<sup>62</sup> The author of the BRICS, Jim O'Neill, has acknowledged that all the BRICS, except Russia, have realised the position initially envisioned in 2001, and Sharma (2012) has gone so far as to state that Russia is part of the BRICS 'if only because the term sounds better with an R.'<sup>63</sup>

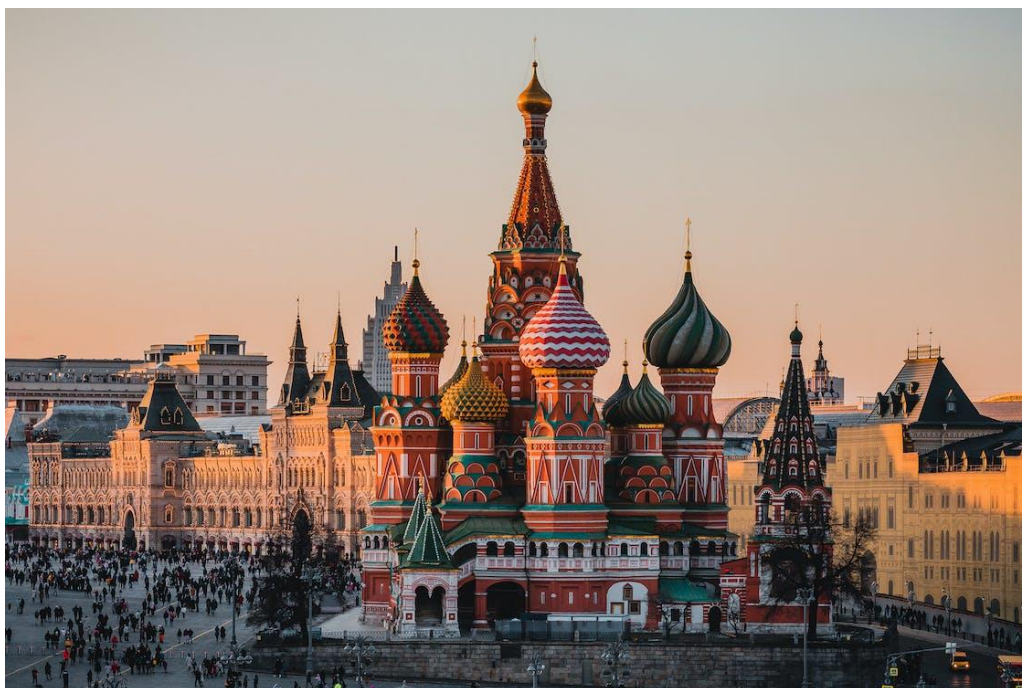


Figure 3 Russia is viewed as more of a legacy power as opposed to a rising power, according to Andrew F. Cooper, and is consequently seen as an outlier within the BRICS, especially when compared with China. Source: Дмитрий Трепольский, Pexels, Available from: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/the-famous-saint-basil-s-cathedral-in-russia-8285167/>

Nonetheless, Russia has enjoyed a degree of diplomatic support from its fellow BRICS, if not in an overt manner, with the group of four abstaining from key UN resolutions condemning Russia's action in Ukraine since 2014,<sup>64</sup> and going as far as to fully supporting Russia when Australia threatened to remove the state from the G20.<sup>65</sup> The fallout from Russia's foreign policy was most visible during the most recent BRICS summit, in which, due to South Africa being a signatory of the International Criminal Court, it would be obliged to arrest Vladimir Putin, forcing him to deliver his speech virtually. While not threatening the cohesion of the BRICS (South Africa has conducted naval exercises with Russia and China since Russia's invasion of Ukraine)<sup>66</sup> it does serve to illustrate how Russia's membership complicates the diplomacy of the group of nations.

<sup>59</sup> Beattie, Alan. 2023

<sup>60</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>61</sup> MacFarlane, S. Neil. 2006

<sup>62</sup> Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015

<sup>63</sup> Sharma, Ruchir. 2012

<sup>64</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016

<sup>65</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>66</sup> McKenzie, David. 2023.

Another example of tension amongst the BRICS can be seen with India, the most populous BRICS state, who has had numerous territorial border disputes with its fellow BRICS neighbour, China, many of which have threatened to derail the BRICS summits. China and India have been embroiled in a frozen border dispute that has repeatedly become hot, including in 2013, 2017, and most recently in 2020, during which at least twenty Indian soldiers lost their lives during clashes with China's PLA troops.<sup>67</sup> Sino-Indian rivalry has not diminished despite their joint membership of the BRICS, with Chinese expansion into the Indian sea, alongside extensive investment within Pakistan, and India's close ties with the United States increasing tension between the two states. India has adopted a pragmatic approach in its relations with China, taking a 'nuanced posture of cooperation-cum-competition'<sup>68</sup> participating in the NDB, but declining China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>69</sup> As already noted, India and China have purposefully omitted any reference to these rivalries and disputes during BRICS summits, allowing them to remain unresolved in order to prioritise harmony amongst the BRICS. Such a policy, however, leaves open the possibility that such a dispute could easily arise again.



Figure 4 Despite shows of unity at the BRICS summits, China and India's territorial disputes remain contentious and liable to reemerge despite their shared membership within the group. Source: Suket Dedhia, Pexels, Available from: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/mountain-and-body-of-water-painting-570026/>

Further complicating matters are the newest additions to the BRICS, some of whom have imported their own disputes with other BRICS states into the group, threatening cohesion. Egypt and Ethiopia have been engaged in a long-running dispute over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam,<sup>70</sup> while new BRICS members Iran and Saudi-Arabia have been engaged in a proxy war within Yemen for a number of years.<sup>71</sup> Viewed holistically, these internal tensions and contradictions leads to the conclusion that the BRICS, even before their recent expansion, are so plagued by intra-group conflict as to represent a very serious challenge to realising a coherent and meaningful single narrative across a range of policy issues. In this vein, the BRICS can be seen as an 'impossible alliance',<sup>72</sup> unable to coordinate at the UN,<sup>73</sup> and bridge their diversity to offer anything like the single stance of the G7 or EU, although such cohesiveness was never sought by the BRICS, consciously tending as they have towards informality.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, it is 'precisely this looseness in form that bestows staying power on the BRICS',<sup>75</sup> but which equally prevents the group from offering a coherent alternative to the Western-backed global order and thus possessing 'no common ideology or cause to speak of.'<sup>76</sup> This is unfortunate for the BRICS, for their diversity could easily have made the group more of an alternative for other nation states: Brazil's long-term

<sup>67</sup> Wallen, Joe. 2022

<sup>68</sup> Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023

<sup>71</sup> Mohan, C. Raja. 2023

<sup>72</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Miller, Manjari Chatterjee. 2021



sustainable development leadership, India's championing of the Global South, and South Africa's human security leadership<sup>77</sup> all could have been championed by the BRICS collectively. Instead, the BRICS, as demonstrated and owing to their internal disputes, can be assessed to have relied upon generic communiques. It is now increasingly clear with the new additions that projecting a single narrative will become even more of a challenge.

### International Concerns

For too long, the West's response to the BRICS was one of disparagement and disinterest,<sup>78</sup> even after the inception of the New Development Bank, demonstrating the political nature and economic capability of the group. With the latest expansion of the BRICS, this is no longer a possibility for the West, which is now forced to acknowledge that it is unable to assure the support of the Global South around its interests. This is most clear with the BRICS' response to the war in Ukraine, as previously mentioned, in which the BRICS have refused to join Western-backed sanctions on their fellow BRICS state Russia.<sup>79</sup> This follows a range of actions by the BRICS that have revealed their unwillingness to follow the lead of the West, from criticising sanctions imposed on Iran, to decrying Western intervention in Libya.<sup>80</sup> Increasingly, the BRICS are willing, *if only rhetorically*,<sup>81</sup> to take a stance on a range of political issues and make their voice heard. This has led some Western commentators, especially in light of the recent expansion of the BRICS, to posit that the group could become more anti-Western, and more in-line with the foreign policy of China. Xi Jinping's address at the latest BRICS summit, delivered by Chinese Commerce Minister, Wang Wentao, was striking in its uninhibited criticism of the US, accusing America as being 'obsessed with maintaining hegemony.'<sup>82</sup> That being said, to recognise the group's penchant for following an alternative course to the West is not the same as labelling the group as being anti-Western,<sup>83</sup> this view being supported by the inclusion of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE into the group, all of whom are close US security partners.<sup>84</sup>

The West should learn from its early mistake of disinterest in the BRICS, for this this lack of interest has arguably led to the degree of influence both China and Russia now command in Africa. China's extensive lending under its Belt and Road Initiative has already been referred to, and its infrastructure investments across Africa are substantial.<sup>85</sup> Despite accusations that Chinese lending has led to so-called 'debt-trap diplomacy,'<sup>86</sup> (levelling African states with unpayable loans for infrastructure projects), China and the BRICS remain a positive attraction for those states sceptical of the West. China, in bringing South Africa into the BRICS, consciously sought to champion the rights and demands of Africa, and in so doing diversify the BRICS. This has not meant China has been immune from criticism for its activities across the continent, with accusations of colonialism levelled against China,<sup>87</sup> but it is in no doubt that the economic resources of China, and the military resources of Russia, are both highly attractive. This is especially the case for the spate of African states which have recently experiences coups, and who are consciously turning away from the West and towards the BRICS.

Despite a somewhat disappointing turn-out during its latest Africa Summit<sup>88</sup>, Russia, through the activities of its mercenary group, Wagner (now the Russian Expeditionary Corps<sup>89</sup>), has offered an alternative security arrangement for a number of African states, many of whom have experienced recent coups.<sup>90</sup> This has led some observers to decry Western inaction, asking 'where is the Western version of Brics?'<sup>91</sup> imploring Western governments to 'wrestle in the mud'<sup>92</sup> with the Chinese and Russian challenge within Africa.' Such a

---

<sup>77</sup> Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021

<sup>78</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016

<sup>79</sup> Adler, Nils. 2023

<sup>80</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>81</sup> Brosig, Malte. 2021

<sup>82</sup> Davidson, Helen. 2023

<sup>83</sup> Cooper, Andrew F. 2016

<sup>84</sup> Mohan, C. Raja. 2023

<sup>85</sup> Bennon, Michael., and Fukuyama, Francis. 2023

<sup>86</sup> Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021

<sup>87</sup> Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015

<sup>88</sup> Flanagan, Jane. 2023

<sup>89</sup> Inwood, Joe., and Tacchi, Jake. 2024

<sup>90</sup> Mwai, Peter. 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Harding, Andrew. 2023

<sup>92</sup> Mohan, C. Raja. 2023

task looks increasingly challenging for the West, with African states turning to Russia and China, and their alternative vision of global order, closely related to the aim of multipolarity shared by the BRICS.

## Conclusion

The recent addition of the five new member-states must be seen as a watershed moment for the BRICS, bringing as they do the greatest change to the BRICS since their inception in 2009. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates all became BRICS in 2024, doubling the current size of the BRICS. Such an expansion comes with its complications, as already referenced, both Egypt and Ethiopia, along with Iran and Saudi-Arabia have been engaged in long running disputes, both of which threaten the cohesiveness of the group. The choice of countries also raises questions in relation to those states not admitted: the low-income Ethiopia has been invited to join, while Nigeria and Indonesia have not. Interest in the group remains high, with a reported 18-24 countries seeking membership during the latest summit,<sup>93</sup> with host South Africa claiming that a staggering 40 nations had shown an interest in ascension,<sup>94</sup> with no sign such demand is abating.<sup>95</sup> Clearly, for all the internal tensions the BRICS possess, the group remains a very attractive association, particularly for African states wary of the power and influence of the West in general, and of America in particular.

The speed of the transformation, from 'a global non-entity into an informal institution that pursues global policy leadership,'<sup>96</sup> is arguably one of the defining phenomena of international relations in recent decades. When considered concurrently with the rise of China, the influence of the BRICS will no doubt have significant implications for the entire global order, especially when taking into account its expansion to a grouping of ten nations.

As has been shown in this brief overview of the BRICS, despite their diversity and inner conflicts, the group has managed to present a united front since their inception in 2009, and have evolved to create the New Development Bank, reducing the negative impacts of dollarisation, and more recently to expand their membership of nation states. Significant and perhaps increasing challenges remain, including remaining aligned to shared goals and objectives, as well as realising meaningful change at the possible expense of internal cohesion.

Profound transformations have unfolded since O'Neil first consolidated four nations under the BRIC acronym in 2001, such change being particularly evident in their burgeoning economic and political clout, which has exceeded all initial prognostications. Undoubtedly the expanded BRICS will persist as a pivotal player in global affairs, poised as they are to challenge the objectives of the West in general and American unipolarity in particular. Despite inherent internal tensions, the alliance will no doubt endure as an appealing alternative for nations in the Global South seeking alternatives to the prevailing Western-dominated international order.

---

<sup>93</sup> Lawford, Melissa. 2023; see also Cotterill, Joseph., et al. 2023

<sup>94</sup> Osborn, Catherine. 2023

<sup>95</sup> McCarthy, Simone. 2024

<sup>96</sup> Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021

## Bibliography

Anon. 2024. Brics: What is the group and which countries have joined? BBC NEWS. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-66525474>

Anon. 2024. South Africa says five countries confirm they are joining BRICS. Reuters. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-africa-says-five-countries-confirm-they-are-joining-brics-2024-01-31/>

Adler, Nils. 2023. Can BRICS create a new world order? *Al Jazeera*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/22/can-brics-create-a-new-world-order>

Beattie, Alan. 2023. How the Brics nations risk becoming satellites of China. *The Financial Times*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/08faba62-aa6e-4914-957b-d7e65ac069f2>

Beattie, Alan. 2023. The Brics don't stack up as a committee to run the world. *The Financial Times*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/dc227378-6e08-46bd-abc0-77344b1cac28>

Bennon, Michael., and Fukuyama, Francis. 2023. [China's Road to Ruin: The Real Toll of Beijing's Belt and Road](#). *Foreign Affairs*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/belt-road-initiative-xi-imf>

Brosig, Malte. 2021. Fit for Purpose? BRICS and Inner-Group Conflicts. *Global Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1758-5899.12998>

Chaulia, Sreeram. 2021. In Spite of the Spite: An Indian View of China and India in BRICS. *Global Policy*. Volume 12 (4). pp.519-523

Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2015. China's Approach to BRICS. *Journal of Contemporary China*. Volume 24 (92). pp. 357-375.

[Cooper, Andrew F. 2016. \*The BRICS: A Very Short Introduction\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.](#)

Davidson, Helen. 2023. Rumours swirl after Xi Jinping fails to give key Brics speech. *The Guardian*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/23/xi-jinping-brics-china-fails-to-give-key-speech>

Downie, Christian. 2015. Global energy governance: do the BRICs have the energy to drive reform? *International Affairs*. Volume 91 (4). Pp.799-812

Flanagan, Jane. 2023. Russia-Africa summit: Poor turnout to heap humiliation on Putin. *The Times*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-africa-summit-2023-putin-st-petersburg-wagner-group-tp8bq28vm>

Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023. BRICS Expansion Could Help Egypt's Ailing Economy. *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: [https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/30/brics-expansion-egypt-economy-ethiopia-investment-dollar-china-russia/?tpcc=recirc\\_latest062921](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/30/brics-expansion-egypt-economy-ethiopia-investment-dollar-china-russia/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921)

Gbadamosi, Nosmot. 2023. Why the BRICS Aren't Crumbling in Africa. *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/23/brics-ukraine-russia-africa-summit-ramaphosa/>

Gramer, Robbie., and Lu, Christina. 2023. Can Russia and China Breathe New Life Into BRICS? *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/18/brics-summit-china-russia-expansion-dollar-currency/>

Inwood, Joe., and Tacchi, Jake. 2024. Wagner in Africa: How the Russian mercenary group has rebranded. BBC NEWS. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-68322230>

Lawford, Melissa. 2023. How Putin's war turned an economic conference into an alliance against the West. *The Telegraph*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/06/03/vladimir-putin-brics-economic-conference-anti-west/>

Leahy, Joe., and Alim, Arjun Neil. 2023. Saudi Arabia in talks to join China-based 'Brics bank'. *The Financial Times*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/45abe561-a6cc-4058-b0a1-ecdc46a2d839>

McCarthy, Simone. 2024. Countries are clamouring to join BRICS group, South Africa says, as Russia takes up leadership. *CNN*. [Online]. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/01/china/brics-membership-applications-china-russia-intl-hnk/index.html>

MacFarlane, S. Neil. 2006. The 'R' in BRICs: Is Russia an Emerging Power? *International Affairs*. Volume 82 (1). pp. 41-57.

[McKenzie, David. 2023. South Africa risks backlash for Russian naval exercises, but its history with Moscow runs deep. CNN](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/19/africa/south-africa-russia-china-military-drills-intl-cmd/index.html). [Online]. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/19/africa/south-africa-russia-china-military-drills-intl-cmd/index.html>

Miller, Manjari Chatterjee. 2021. Why BRICS Still Matters. *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/27/brics-members-summit-brazil-russia-india-china-south-africa/>

Mohan, C. Raja. 2023. BRICS Expansion Is No Triumph for China. *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/29/brics-expansion-china-russia-global-south-us-geopolitics-alliances/>

Mwai, Peter. 2023. Gabon coup: The latest in a series of military takeovers on the continent. *BBC NEWS*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-46783600>

O' Neill, Jim. 2001. Building Better Global Economic BRICs. Goldman Sachs. *Global Economics Paper Series* (No. 66). [Online]. Available from: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/build-better-brics.pdf>

Osborn, Catherine. 2023. South America Is Upping Its Bet on BRICS. *Foreign Policy*. [Online]. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/18/brics-summit-bank-economy-dollar-currency-inflation-russia-ukraine-putin/>

Papa, Mihaela., and Verma, Raj. 2021. Scenarios for BRICS Evolution in Light of the India–China Conflict. *Global Policy*. Volume 12 (4). pp.539-544

Plummer, Robert. 2023. Argentina pulls out of plans to join Brics bloc. *BBC NEWS*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-67842992>

S.J.C. 2018. Has BRICS lived up to expectations? *The Economist*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.economist.com/free-exchange/2018/07/27/has-brics-lived-up-to-expectations>

Sharma, Ruchir. 2012. Broken BRICs: Why the Rest Stopped Rising. *Foreign Affairs*. [Online]. Available from: [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/brazil/2012-10-22/broken-brics?check\\_logged\\_in=1](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/brazil/2012-10-22/broken-brics?check_logged_in=1)

Shan, Lee Ying. 2024. BRICS nations to see highest surge in millionaire count over the next decade. *CNBC*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/15/brics-to-see-highest-surge-in-millionaire-population-over-the-next-decade.html>

[Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016. \*The BRICS and the Future of Global Order\*. New York: Lexington Books](#)

Tett, Gillian. 2023. Prepare for a multipolar currency world. *The Financial Times*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/f8f3b2cd-6690-4f26-b81e-e972751c8799>

Wallen, Joe. 2022. Border clashes between India and China 'regularly covered up.' *The Telegraph*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/border-clashes-india-china-regularly-covered/>