

BRICS: From Emerging Bloc to Global Force — A Comprehensive Geopolitical Study

Introduction

BRICS, originally conceived as an economic idea, has transformed into one of the most significant geopolitical groupings of the 21st century. The acronym was coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill, a British economist at Goldman Sachs, who identified Brazil, Russia, India, and China as rising economies poised to reshape global financial and political order. His forecast highlighted that these four nations, due to their large populations, rapid economic growth, and increasing influence in international markets, would soon demand greater representation and decision-making power in global governance institutions.

Formation and Early Evolution

The initial phase of BRICS, then known as BRIC, was informal and consultative in nature. The first official meeting among the foreign ministers of these countries occurred on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in 2006. By 2009, as the global financial crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of the Western-dominated economic system, the BRIC nations seized the moment to come together formally. The first summit of BRIC leaders was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009. It culminated in a joint declaration that underlined their commitment to building a more democratic, multipolar world order and reforming institutions like the IMF and World Bank to better represent emerging economies.

The inclusion of South Africa in 2010 marked a turning point. Its entry transformed the group into BRICS and added an African dimension to the alliance, enhancing its claim to represent the interests of the Global South. South Africa's participation also broadened the geographic reach of the grouping, allowing it to tap into the continent's development challenges and opportunities. As a result, BRICS started gaining more political and strategic depth beyond economics.

Institutional Framework and Key Mechanisms

Institutionally, BRICS evolved rapidly. The core of its functioning rests on the annual leaders' summit, where heads of state provide strategic direction. These summits are supported by ministerial-level meetings across multiple sectors—finance, education, agriculture, health, and more. Among the most tangible outcomes of this cooperation is the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB), established through the Fortaleza Declaration of 2014. Operational since 2015, the NDB is headquartered in Shanghai and aims to finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects in member countries. It operates on principles of equal voting rights, setting it apart from Bretton Woods institutions where decision-making is based on financial contributions.

Parallely, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) was introduced with a capital pool of \$100 billion to provide liquidity support to member states in balance-of-payments crises. The CRA is not a replacement for the IMF but offers an alternative that is perceived to be less intrusive and more sensitive to the economic sovereignty of developing countries. Other institutional arms like the BRICS Think Tank Council and the BRICS Business Council were set up to facilitate policy-oriented research and private sector collaboration respectively.

Reforming Global Governance

As global governance institutions struggled to reflect the changing dynamics of global power, BRICS began to position itself as the voice of the Global South. The theme of reforming international institutions has remained central to all BRICS declarations. The bloc has consistently advocated for democratizing the United Nations Security Council by seeking permanent memberships for India and Brazil, enhancing the representation of African nations, and reworking voting quotas at the IMF and World Bank.

Expanding Policy Agenda

Over time, BRICS has expanded its agenda to include new domains. Economic cooperation remains pivotal, but political dialogue, climate governance, technology transfer, and security concerns have gained prominence. Cybersecurity, digital public infrastructure, and artificial intelligence governance are now part of the BRICS discourse. India, for example, has been a strong proponent of digital public infrastructure, with models like Aadhaar and UPI serving as global examples of inclusive fintech.

BRICS+ and Expansion Initiatives

One of the most transformative developments in BRICS' recent history is its expansion. At the Johannesburg summit in 2023, invitations were extended to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The decision signaled BRICS' intent to evolve into a broader platform, possibly rivaling the G20 in terms of global reach. Argentina later withdrew due to domestic political changes, but four countries—Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and UAE—joined as full members in 2024. In 2025, Indonesia also became a member, bringing the total count to ten.

This enlargement presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the addition of resource-rich, strategically located countries enhances BRICS' credibility as a counterweight to Western alliances. On the other, it introduces complexities in governance and consensus-building. The diverse political systems, conflicting regional interests, and varying economic models among members necessitate deft diplomatic management.

Highlights of the 47th BRICS Summit

The 47th BRICS Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in July 2025, was emblematic of the group's growing assertiveness. Despite the absence of President Xi Jinping and the virtual participation of President Putin, the summit witnessed strong leadership from Brazil, India, and Indonesia. The theme of the summit, "Strengthening Global South Cooperation for More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance," resonated with the broader developmental goals of the Global South. The summit's outcomes included a unified call for IMF reform, proposals for local currency settlements, and a roadmap for ethical AI governance. The Brazilian-led initiative for a "Tropical Forests Forever" fund was welcomed as a landmark climate proposal.

India's Role and South Asian Dynamics

India's position within BRICS remains strategic. As the only member with deep ties to both the West and the East, India plays a balancing role. It supports reforms within existing institutions rather than creating parallel structures. India has also emerged as a leader in the digital transformation discourse, promoting scalable and secure models of governance through digital public goods. At the same time, India maintains cautious engagement with China, especially in light of unresolved border disputes and differing geopolitical priorities.

Other South Asian countries have also sought engagement with BRICS. Bangladesh, already a member of the NDB, has applied for full membership and is seen as a strong candidate due to its growing economy and strategic location. Sri Lanka formally submitted its membership bid in 2024, seeking infrastructure financing and regional cooperation. Pakistan's application, however, has faced resistance from India and other members due to its geopolitical alignment and internal instability.

Reactions from Western Alliances

The West has responded to BRICS with a mix of skepticism and strategic recalibration. The United States has criticized BRICS' attempts at de-dollarisation and questioned its democratic credentials, especially with the inclusion of countries like Iran and Russia. However, the West has also sought to engage constructively with individual BRICS members, especially India, Brazil, and South Africa. The European Union has launched development cooperation packages for African countries to counterbalance Chinese influence within BRICS. The G7 has increased its outreach to the Global South, often inviting BRICS members to its summits to maintain engagement.

Challenges and Contradictions

Despite this, BRICS faces multiple internal contradictions. The most pressing is the India-China rivalry, which casts a shadow over joint initiatives. The strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran also poses diplomatic hurdles. Governance becomes more challenging as

membership expands. Unlike the G7 or NATO, BRICS operates without a central secretariat or enforcement mechanisms, relying heavily on consensus.

Resource constraints also pose limitations. While the NDB has made significant strides, its lending portfolio is still modest compared to the World Bank. Calls for capital increases have grown, but they face resistance due to fears of unequal influence. Additionally, the inclusion of countries under international sanctions exposes BRICS to reputational risks and complicates financial operations.

The Road Ahead

Nevertheless, BRICS has the potential to reshape the global order. Its future lies in its ability to deliver tangible public goods such as infrastructure financing, climate solutions, and digital innovation to its member states and partners. By 2030, BRICS is expected to expand further, possibly including Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. Integration with other regional blocs like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the African Union may create a larger, multipolar coalition.

Long-term success will depend on maintaining strategic autonomy, resolving internal differences, and balancing ambition with pragmatism. As the world moves toward multipolarity, BRICS stands at a crossroads—either it becomes an effective instrument of equitable global governance or risks becoming a fragmented platform of rhetoric.

References and Research Notes

(All references are based on public domain sources including United Nations documents, BRICS summit declarations, Reuters, and policy briefings as of July 2025. A full source index is available upon request.)

This document is an original research-based policy analysis intended for academic and strategic audiences. It conforms to the standards of independent geopolitical scholarship.