

The BRICS expanded: Shaped by – or shaping – the global order?

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers and academics face a persistent puzzle when analysing the BRICS: determining what exactly this grouping wants to achieve. The uncertainty stems from contradictory signals – BRICS countries simultaneously call for reforming global institutions while building their own parallel alternatives; champion multilateralism while actively coordinating positions that challenge Western (especially United States) leadership of multilateralism; and advocate for inclusive governance, while often excluding traditional powers from their arrangements. Is BRICS shaped by, or shaping, the unfolding global order? The contributions to this special issue illuminate different aspects of the 'shaped vs shaping' dialectic through three analytical approaches that collectively reveal recurring themes and competing interpretations of BRICS' transformative potential. The aim is to present new insights for policymakers at the national as well as international level, and to provide valuable research to scholars and students of international affairs.

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Introduction

Policymakers and academics face a persistent puzzle when analysing the BRICS: determining what exactly this grouping wants to achieve. The uncertainty stems from contradictory signals – BRICS countries simultaneously call for reforming global institutions while building their own parallel alternatives; champion multilateralism while actively coordinating positions that challenge Western (especially United States) leadership of multilateralism; and advocate for inclusive governance, while often excluding traditional powers from their arrangements.

These contradictions have intensified following the expansion of the BRICS from its original five members – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and (later) South Africa, hence the acronym – to ten countries by early 2025, encompassing nearly half of the global GDP and population.¹ The enlarged grouping now (at the time of publication) includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, potentially representing an attempt to recalibrate global governance rather than merely expanding a club.

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The timing amplifies the stakes dramatically. Just as BRICS² foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to ‘strengthening multilateralism’ in April 2025, the United States withdrew from key international organisations through a series of executive orders.³ This creates an unprecedented paradox: while America retreats from institutions it created, a group of rising and emerging powers, through the BRICS, embrace multilateral governance on their own terms.

The recent expansion brings this fundamental tension into sharp focus, raising critical questions about the enlarged grouping’s agency and influence in global affairs. Does the expanded BRICS represent a reactive formation, essentially shaped by existing power structures and seeking accommodation within established frameworks? Or has BRICS set its sights on becoming a proactive force capable of fundamentally reshaping the global order according to its own vision? To borrow a culinary metaphor, the distinction is between seeking a seat at the existing table of global governance versus opening an entirely different restaurant with its own menu and rules. This choice carries profound implications; a BRICS that is primarily shaped by the existing order would function as a reformist pressure group, working to democratise current institutions while accepting their basic legitimacy and perhaps take up a greater leadership role as the established powers recede. However, a BRICS that actively reshapes the global order represents a more transformative proposition – one that challenges the fundamental premises of Western-led governance and offers genuinely alternative pathways for international cooperation. The expanded membership highlights this dilemma, as the grouping must now demonstrate whether its enhanced demographic and economic weight translates into genuine agenda-setting power or merely provides greater voice within pre-existing constraints.

This special issue of the *South African Journal of International Affairs (SAJIA)* addresses these critical questions by examining whether BRICS expansion represents a genuine effort to reshape the global order or is primarily an adaptive response to changing power dynamics. The contributors analyse both the proactive institutional innovations that suggest transformative ambitions and the reactive adaptations that indicate pragmatic accommodation to existing constraints.

BRICS – what it is, and what it is not

Understanding BRICS requires analytical clarity about the organisation’s transformation from an investment bank acronym into a significant geopolitical platform. The BRIC concept originated in 2001, when Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neill identified Brazil, Russia, India, and China as emerging economies poised to challenge the G7’s dominance in global GDP within decades.⁴ Indeed, this conceptualisation saw the group as predominantly economic in nature; however, this shifted after the 2008 global financial crisis that exposed vulnerabilities of Western-dominated institutions and highlighted the need for broader representation in global economic governance.

The crisis catalysed the BRIC states into political institutionalisation. In 2009, these four countries convened their inaugural summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, even as the financial crisis elevated the G20 from a technical forum to the premier global economic coordination mechanism, meeting at heads of state level. South Africa’s accession in 2011 marked a pivotal transformation, expanding the grouping beyond O’Neill’s original

economic categorisation to encompass broader geographic representation and symbolic inclusion of the African continent. This first expansion established a crucial precedent: BRICS membership would be determined not solely by economic metrics – South Africa's GDP was significantly smaller than that of the other members – but by strategic geopolitical considerations and the desire for genuine representation of the Global South. The decision effectively transformed BRICS from an economic investment concept into a deliberate political project spanning multiple continents.

The group's institutional development accelerated with the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) in 2014 (they became operational the following year), marking BRICS' evolution from diplomatic forum to operational institution. The 2023 expansion decision at the Johannesburg summit – inviting Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join – represented the most significant transformation initiative since the group's inception.

The expansion process has revealed both external pressures and different preferences among existing members. Russia and China were keen on extensive expansion at pace, while Brazil and India were more reticent and South Africa was somewhere in the middle. Around 40 countries had expressed interest in joining the BRICS. Argentina's acceptance of the invitation, followed by withdrawal under a new government in Buenos Aires, illustrates how domestic political changes affect international commitments.⁵ Saudi Arabia remains with one foot-in, one foot-out – having neither declined nor accepted its invitation, reflecting careful balancing between traditional Western partnerships and emerging BRICS opportunities.⁶ Indonesia's delayed acceptance until 2025 demonstrates how regional institutional loyalties and domestic political cycles influence membership decisions.⁷

The current membership structure reflects a sophisticated three-tier approach to engagement. Full members are eligible to participate in all BRICS activities and engage in consensus-based decision-making processes. The BRICS+ outreach initiative, launched by China in 2017, provides an informal platform for dialogue with non-member countries from the Global South through annual side meetings at the BRICS summit. The Kazan Summit in October 2024 approved a new 'partner' category, creating a middle ground between the BRICS+ dialogue and full membership. Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan accepted partner status.⁸

This graduated approach addresses the fundamental tension between inclusivity and effectiveness, creating flexibility for countries seeking different levels of engagement while managing organisational growth. Yet, this tiered structure also creates limitations that constrain the BRICS' operational capacity through coordination challenges, as different tiers have varying degrees of commitment to collective initiatives and differing degrees of authority over group decisions.

What is BRICS? It could be described as a platform for emerging powers to coordinate positions, share experiences, and collectively advocate for alternative approaches to global governance. It operates through consensus-building rather than majority voting, emphasising process over binding outcomes. What BRICS emphatically is not, however, is a traditional trade bloc, military alliance, or ideological movement. Unlike the European Union or NATO, BRICS does not require harmonisation of domestic policies, collective defence commitments, or shared value systems. The articles in this special issue bear this out.

This tolerance for disagreement and autonomy among members reflects BRICS' functional approach of compartmentalising differences while preserving cooperation in

domains of shared interest. This adaptability serves as both the organisation's primary asset and fundamental weakness – it enables the accommodation of heterogeneity yet simultaneously hampers the group's capacity to formulate unified strategies for addressing multifaceted global issues that demand persistent alignment and substantial resource mobilisation.

The expansion paradox: Strength through diversity

The recent growth of membership introduces an expansion paradox. On the one hand, broader membership enhances BRICS' claim to represent the Global South and increases its collective economic and demographic weight; however, not all BRICS members, particularly Russia and to some extent China, fit neatly within traditional Global South categorisations. On the other hand, achieving consensus among increasingly diverse members becomes more challenging, potentially undermining the group's effectiveness.

The new BRICS members span different continents, political systems, economic models and strategic priorities. Iran's inclusion, particularly given its hostile relationship with Western powers, may signal BRICS' evolution from an economic cooperation platform toward a geopolitical alternative. In any case, the expansion fundamentally alters internal dynamics by requiring decision-making processes to navigate between authoritarian systems (such as Iran and Egypt), constitutional monarchies (like the UAE), federal democracies (like Ethiopia), and established regional powers with distinct strategic cultures (such as Indonesia, as a member of ASEAN). Moreover, expansion introduces new sources of tension as regional rivalries – between Middle Eastern members or those arising from African continental dynamics – complicate organisational coherence alongside competing economic models that challenge unified policy development.

Internal divisions among existing members have also complicated the enlargement process, revealing different strategic visions for BRICS' future. China and Russia emerged as the most vigorous proponents – China viewing expansion as a way to amplify global influence and build counterweights to Western-dominated institutions, and Russia similarly supporting enlargement to bolster its international standing amid Western isolation. By contrast, India and Brazil approached expansion cautiously. Brazil worried that a larger, more unwieldy group could reduce its influence and shift BRICS from its original economic focus. New Delhi feared additional China-aligned members might dilute its position and strengthen Beijing's dominance within the bloc.

These divergent preferences, managed through BRICS' consensus requirement, suggest that future expansions may prove increasingly difficult. The complexities of accommodating ten diverse members may make both original and newer members reluctant to accept future enlargement, at least anytime soon. Success in managing the current expansion would create momentum for future growth; failure to maintain coherence could constrain further enlargement and test the organisation's adaptive capacity under diversity pressures.

Article contributions: Mapping the analytical terrain

The contributions to this special issue illuminate different aspects of the 'shaped vs shaping' dialectic through three analytical approaches that collectively reveal recurring themes and competing interpretations of BRICS' transformative potential.

Theoretical and contextual analyses

The theoretical and contextual analyses establish critical frameworks for understanding BRICS' evolving global governance role through complementary analytical lenses, revealing both its transformative potential and structural constraints. Gustavo de Carvalho, Jaimal Anand, and Sanusha Naidu develop a structural-multiplex framework – combining Amitav Acharya's multiplex order and Susan Strange's structural power – to assess whether the expansion of BRICS reflects proactive restructuring or an adaptive response. They identify a tension between transformative aims and structural limits, termed 'tempered incremental revisionism', which shows that BRICS builds complementary institutions, not replacements, within Western-led governance.

Empirical analysis of BRICS institutions reveals the persistence of structural dependencies despite the presence of alternative mechanisms. Peter Brian M Wang and Rahul Mishra's power-legitimacy framework demonstrates that BRICS members 'desire not so much to displace the current order but adherence to its core purposes, values, and principles', finding that institutions like the NDB and CRA face fundamental challenges in achieving systemic transformation despite enhanced collective power through expansion. Omonye Omoigberale's realist approach highlights internal divergences – economic disparities, where China's GDP exceeds \$18 trillion, while South Africa's reaches only \$419 billion – alongside contrasting political systems and strategic rivalries that pose significant obstacles to cohesion.

Country-specific strategic calculations

The country-specific contributions reveal recurring patterns of strategic hedging and influence-seeking in a multipolar order. Each member navigates complex calculations between global aspirations and national constraints. These analyses highlight how disillusionment with Western-led institutions motivates strategic realignment among diverse BRICS members, albeit with varying motivations and outcomes.

Founding members show evolving ties with Western-led institutions, shifting from engagement to strategic distancing. Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman trace South Africa's shift from liberal democratic aspirant to assertive Global South actor, driven by disillusionment with Western forums and a turn toward BRICS – even at the cost of earlier liberal ideals. Similarly, Paulo Esteves and Carlos Frederico Coelho illustrate Brazil's shift from cooperative reformer to cautious participant, as national goals increasingly diverge from the BRICS' assertive and geopolitically complex stance.

Power asymmetries within BRICS shape its institutional direction and member strategies. Borja Macías Urbano argues that China employs expansion to promote a hegemonic vision that challenges the dominance of the Bretton Woods system, building an alternative economic bloc centred on the interdependence of emerging economies rather than traditional South-South cooperation. Vuk Vuksanovic shows how Russia's engagement has shifted from Soviet-era ideology to pragmatic alignment, using BRICS to resist Western isolation and assert great power status, especially in the wake of Crimea's annexation and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Expansion complicates strategic calculations for both BRICS members and aspirants, creating new opportunities and challenges. Shubhrajeev Konwer demonstrates how India's position is strengthened as a voice of the Global South, yet strained by the

need to balance rivalry with China and its ties with the West and Russia, especially as new members gravitate towards China's orbit. Similarly, Buğra Süssler illustrates how countries like Turkey utilise BRICS engagement to diversify partnerships and signal diplomatic intent, leveraging the bloc to engage non-Western powers while maintaining commitments to NATO and the EU. Together, these cases highlight how expansion boosts BRICS' influence but complicates members' strategic positioning.

Thematic and empirical approaches

The thematic contributions explore specific policy domains that illuminate broader questions about BRICS' capacity to reshape global governance structures. These empirical analyses reveal how internal dynamics and sectoral cooperation patterns both enable and constrain the bloc's transformative potential across different governance domains.

Internal cohesion is essential for the BRICS' transformative potential, particularly where the interests of its members intersect. Cliff Mboya and Swati Arun examine China–India rivalry in the Indian Ocean, highlighting shared strategic interests among new members and BRICS' limited capacity to manage intra-bloc tensions, underscoring that its global influence depends on internal cooperation. This challenge also extends to economics: Melanie Müller's study of mineral sector strategies shows BRICS states favour flexible, parallel approaches on the trade of critical minerals over unified action, working toward a multipolar order rather than forming a cohesive bloc against the West.

Financial system transformation is BRICS' most ambitious challenge to global governance, yet highlights the limits of incremental change. Lauren Johnston examines international payments reform and BRICS' push to reduce reliance on the interbank SWIFT payment system, the US dollar, and Western institutions. While initiatives like local currency trade and alternative lending aim to reshape the system, Johnston argues they reinforce gradual rather than systemic change.

Finally, Rafaela de Sá and Ana Garcia demonstrate that BRICS governance extends beyond states, focusing on the dynamics between the NDB and the BRICS Business Council. Their analysis highlights converging public-private interests and the potential for institutional effectiveness, while also revealing the governance complexities that expansion brings as business actors gain influence.

Answering the central question: Shaped by or shaping?

The contributions to this special issue show that BRICS expansion embodies a key paradox: it reflects both adaptive responses to structural constraints and proactive efforts to shape alternative governance. Rather than a binary of BRICS shaping or being shaped by the global order, the evidence suggests a more nuanced characterisation, one of constrained agency – BRICS has the space to build parallel institutions and coordinate alternatives, yet structural limits temper its transformative potential.

This dynamic appears in three main patterns. First, BRICS develops institutional alternatives (NDB, CRA, payment systems) that operate alongside, rather than replace, existing structures, indicating a parallel approach rather than one of disruption. Second, members utilise BRICS to diversify partnerships and enhance their bargaining power while remaining engaged with traditional institutions – more strategic hedging than

revolutionary change. Third, expansion brings representational gains but also coordination challenges that may undercut effectiveness – the expansion paradox.

The analysis in the special issue is necessarily provisional, informed by the timing of ongoing expansion. Most contributions focus on founding members responding to expansion rather than new members, who are still defining their roles and finding their feet in BRICS. A more comprehensive assessment will in the future be possible with further engagement from newcomers.

The central question – whether an expanded BRICS shapes or is shaped by the global order – remains open and complex. Still, these articles identify key variables influencing its path and raise broader questions about global governance in transition.

Important gaps remain. Climate change governance is notably underexplored, despite its significant environmental implications. Likewise, areas like technological cooperation, digital governance, and emerging security challenges warrant further analysis as member priorities evolve.

This reflection is vital for international relations scholarship and practice. The BRICS expansion presents a critical case for examining how emerging powers pursue collective goals while balancing national interests, how informal institutions evolve under pressure, and how governance adapts in a fragmented world. These insights enrich debates on institutional change, power transitions, and the future of global cooperation.

Notes

1. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, *BRICS Enlargement: A Strategic Move or a Wake-Up Call for the West?* ed. Hans-Dieter Holtzmann and Akim van der Voort (Potsdam-Babelsberg: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, September 2024), <https://www.freiheit.org/publikation/brics-enlargement>.
2. It is essential to note that some analysts have begun referring to the expanded BRICS as 'BRICS+' following its recent enlargement, which can create confusion with the specific outreach initiative described later in this article. Following BRICS' own decision to maintain its established name despite expansion, this special issue uses 'BRICS' to refer to the enlarged grouping while reserving 'BRICS+' exclusively for the outreach mechanism.
3. 'Memorandum on Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations', Presidential Actions (The White House, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-to-certain-united-nations-organizations-and-reviewing-united-states-support-to-all-international-organizations/>; 'BRICS Foreign Ministers Convey Positions on Reforming Global Governance, Strengthening Multilateralism and Promoting Peace', *News* (BRICS, 2025), <https://brics.br/en/news/brics-foreign-ministers-convey-positions-on-reforming-global-governance-strengthening-multilateralism-and-promoting-peace>.
4. Jim O'Neill, 'Building Better Global Economic BRICS', *Global Economics Paper* (Goldman Sachs, 2001), <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/archive/building-better.html>.
5. See, for instance, the BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-67842992>
6. See, for instance, Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-sits-fence-over-brics-with-eye-vital-ties-with-us-2025-05-08/>
7. See, for instance, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/latest-southeast-asia/latest-southeast-asia-indonesia-joins-brics>
8. 'About the BRICS', *BRICS Brazil 2025*, 20 January 2025, <https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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