

The BRICS+ Takes All? Not Yet, but Maybe Soon

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In 2024, BRICS became BRICS+, and this “Plus” draws in the Middle East and Africa. Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Ethiopia are the newcomers, making the region the most represented by number of countries within the emerging structure. Furthermore, other important African and Middle Eastern states wanted to join, such as Algeria and Nigeria, which shows a keen interest towards the BRICS+. In the post-Covid world, the Global South is buzzing with futuristic projects that seem to bypass Europe and the traditional Global North. One might suggest that this represents a means of renegotiating existing contracts. But perhaps it is an attempt to diversify partners. Or is it a shift in direction?

During the Cold War, the majority of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries joined the Non-Aligned Movement. A significant number of them gravitated towards the Soviet Union, while others went closer to the West. Nevertheless, their official stance remained one of non-alignment, with a few exceptions, until the dawn of the unipolar moment, when they aligned themselves with the American-led camp. But in the context of the current shift towards a multipolar world order, these countries are once again adjusting their positions. In light of the obsolescence of the Non-Aligned Movement, the BRICS+ is poised to take the torch.

It is important to note that any changes, if they occur, will be gradual, given the differences among the BRICS+ member states. In fact, there are significant structural issues that cannot be ignored. The grouping

is a loose coalition, not a monolith. It is an “arranged marriage” as the *Handbook of BRICS and Emerging Economies* (Ed. P.B. Anand et al., Oxford University Press, 2021) calls it. Some of these countries have engaged in military skirmishes in recent years, and they continue to be suspicious of each other. Moreover, they belong to different political systems. They are a mixture of violent dictatorships (China and Russia, Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia), authoritarian ethnic or religious states (Ethiopia and Iran), and fragile democracies (India, Brazil and South Africa). The prevailing intelligence and surveillance mentality within this group has the effect of limiting and complicating societal contacts and military cooperation. Furthermore, the Gaza War has revealed internal divisions within the BRICS+ camp. Iran, Brazil and South Africa, and to some extent Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have expressed their support for the Palestinians, while India has backed Israel, and China, Russia and Ethiopia have largely ignored the whole issue.

The heterogeneity argument can be said about the G7, which is often presented as the BRICS' alter ego, but there are numerous differences between the two entities. G7 member states have a long history of interstate cooperation and societal homogenization. With the exception of Japan and, on occasion, Germany and Italy, interdependence and cooperation can be traced back to the 19th century. Moreover, these nations share a similar political and social culture, with vigorous civil society interaction.

With regard to global hegemony, China, which is statistically the leader of the BRICS+, has remained discreet on the world stage. Except for the 2023 Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, there have been few concrete Chinese initiatives. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese government remained conspicuous by its absence, as it did during the Gaza War and the Libyan and Sudanese conflicts. In fact, following

its economic rise of the last three decades, China has not engaged in a geopolitical declaration of its intentions, apart from its actions in its immediate neighbourhood. In other words, Beijing remains a self-interested player, seeking to advance its own interests at the expense of others, focused on remaining the regional hegemon, and not yet prepared to assume the mantle of global leadership, held by Washington until now. In parallel, the United States (US) continues to exercise a dominant military and diplomatic influence, both within the G7 and on a global scale.

In economic terms, the BRICS+ accounts for a 36% share of world GDP (at purchasing power parity, 2022 estimates, bypassing the G7). It is home to close to half the world's population (46%), and more than 40% of global oil production. Yet, the degree of cooperation between its member states remains limited. Furthermore, the BRICS+ hegemon, China, rarely engages in the formation of alliances, in contrast to the US. China acts independently, opening new markets for its companies, often in competition with other BRICS+ members, most notably India and Russia. Moreover, neither the New Development Bank nor the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, which are presented as potential alternatives to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are adequately equipped to assume the roles of these institutions.

On the opposite side, regarding the production of services and quality goods, the G7 countries continue to demonstrate a robust competitive advantage, ranking above the BRICS+ as a whole. Europe continues to attract migrants, both skilled and unskilled. Its universities (and those of the Global North in general) are the reference. Its norms, those of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, remain a lesser evil when compared to the Russian or the Chinese offer. Thus far, the BRICS+ has offered a largely ceremonial alternative, not a tangible one, and the G7 continues to lead. However, observers have been discussing the possibility of a global shift, for a considerable period. Since the 1990s, China has been experiencing a period of sustained growth, which has prompted the US to gradually reorient its foreign policy towards the Pacific region, reducing its engagement in Africa and the Middle East. Meanwhile, Europe has been engaged in a protracted conflict with Russia since the 2000s. In the meantime, several regional powers have made significant advances in a number of traditional Western spheres of influence. China has been

a significant player in this global shift, being the largest trade partner of Africa and the Middle East in terms of individual countries. But, it is also important to consider the influence of other countries, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia and India. It is not coincidental that these countries, apart from Turkey, are the primary actors in the BRICS+.

Subsequently, three events transpired in rapid succession: the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine War and the Gaza War. For the Global South, these events signified a rupture with Europe and the US. In fact, in the wake of the global pandemic in 2020, the US and the European Union (EU) enacted a series of restrictive measures, including the closure of borders and the appropriation of vaccines and masks. In between, China and Russia swiftly offered masks and vaccines, portraying themselves as allies. They employed media and social media campaigns to amplify this image. Despite the Western camp's later role in containing the pandemic and, in reality, saving the Global South, the perception there was one of betrayal by the West and being embraced by Beijing and Moscow.

Beijing remains a self-interested player, seeking to advance its own interests at the expense of others and not yet prepared to assume the mantle of global leadership

In early 2022, as the world was beginning to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia initiated an invasion of Ukraine. The Global South countries were compelled by their Global North partners to adopt a position on the conflict. Nevertheless, many Asians, Arabs, Africans and Latin Americans were emboldened by the prevalence of multipolarity and ambivalent about the origins and goals of this war. They believe the Russian explanation, which posits that this is a proxy war conducted by Washington to weaken Moscow and empower the West. Additionally, in recent years, Global South countries have fostered deeper economic and military ties with China and Russia. Their populations are largely supportive of Russia and critical of the West, feelings that go back to the Era of Decolonization. Consequently, they

opted for positive neutrality and refrained from participating in the sanctions regime against Russia.

The Gaza War, which started in October 2023 as the Ukraine War was raging, may prove to be the last straw. For an African and Middle Eastern population –and leadership– that is sceptical of Western involvement, the Western reaction to Israel's attack confirmed everything they have been decrying for decades. The parallel with the Western activism demonstrated during the Ukraine War is striking. From Pretoria to Riyadh, there is a prevailing conviction that the Global North adheres to its norms when it is advantageous to do so, rather than espousing them universally. Moreover, Moscow and Beijing, despite their avoidance of direct involvement in this conflict, employed disinformation and misinformation tactics, portraying themselves as sympathetic to Palestinian suffering and aligned with the Global South. Opinions polls conducted in early 2024 showed how popular the Chinese and Russian leaders are, and how unpopular their Western peers have become.

The BRICS was inactive for a period, but with the election of Lula in Brazil, the consolidation of Modi's rule in India, China and Russia's assertiveness and South Africa's entry into its fourth post-Apartheid decade, there was a surge in activity. By early 2023, the term "BRICS" suddenly became a prominent topic in the news, particularly in African and Middle Eastern media outlets and social media platforms. The phenomenon commenced among alternative social media influencers and obscure analysts and commentators, before progressing to the mainstream media. By the summer of 2023, several MENA governments appeared to be prepared to join the BRICS.

From pro-Western states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Egypt, to anti-imperialist ones, like Algeria and Iran, there seemed to be a common aspiration: that of the BRICS, which became BRICS+ by the end of the year. A plethora of articles and media programmes lauded the resurgence of the structure and denounced the West, often characterizing it as outmoded. In pan-Arab media outlets such as Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, as well as in the national public and private ones, the commentary on the BRICS+ ranged from excessive exaggeration and ignorant aggrandizement to reasoned articulation and strategic thinking.

In the Global North, there is a scepticism towards the BRICS+, and analysts often compare it to the G7. However, they overlook the cultural and popular dimensions in their assessment. It is evident that the G7 is more economically, militarily and structurally sustainable and its hegemon –the US– is the global hegemon. However, in the contest for public opinion, the BRICS+ is emerging as the clear victor. In an era where social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have become ubiquitous, with virtually every individual having the capacity to disseminate their opinions and ideas through their smartphones, the ability to influence public opinion is of paramount importance. As the actions of the US and the EU continue to alienate Global South citizens and their leaders, the appeal of other regions, particularly the BRICS+ powers, will become increasingly compelling.

China is already the top trading partner of the Global South. Chinese goods are seen of a lesser quality than Japanese, European or American ones, but they are more affordable and they come with less conditions. And they are improving, as the examples of electric vehicles or the mobile industry show. Brazil and Russia do provide the Global South with an increasing share of their food needs, gradually becoming the guardians of its food security.

The BRICS+ countries are themselves hegemonic powers in their respective regions. Testimony to this can be found in the experiences of Ukrainians, Taiwanese, Pakistanis, Somalis, Arabs and to some extent Venezuelans and Zimbabweans, to name a few, who have observed the interventionist behaviour of their larger neighbours. However, due to their historical circumstances, limited resources and overall image, the BRICS+ countries can claim neutrality and continue to advocate for a more egalitarian international system.

Their narrative emphasizes the importance of sovereignty for nation-states and the promotion of multipolarity in the international arena. And this discourse finds an echo in the Global South. It is evident that the separation between Africa and the Middle East and the US and EU will not be immediate. However, it is occurring, as the old world competes with the new world for the Global South and, in one or two generations, the gap will be considerably greater.