

Multipolarity in Practice: Assessing BRICS Expansion and the Shift in Global Power Structures

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Abstract:

This paper will explore what BRICS expansion means to the changing balance of global power and the shift to multipolarity. Based on a mixed-method approach, which is a combination of quantitative analysis of economic factors and their effects on the international system and qualitative assessment of institutional and geopolitical processes, the paper will examine whether the expansion of BRICS can be considered a substantive change in the international system. The results show that BRICS has been successful in increasing its global relevance and more so in the economic weight, trade integration and energy geopolitics. The incorporation of key energy producing and strategic located nations has enhanced the ability of the bloc to impact the global markets and regional dynamics. Nonetheless, even with these gains, BRICS is still limited by internal diversity, economic asymmetry and limited institutional depth, which limits its functioning as a cohesive alternative to Western-led global institutions. As you have empirically analysed and discussed in your paper, multipolarity can best be regarded as an emergent yet transitional state and not a fully established world order. The paper finds that the current BRICS expansion is a factor contributing to the redistribution of power but is not yet a consolidated counter-hegemonic system.

Keywords: BRICS; multipolarity; global power politics; Global South; South-South cooperation

Introduction:

The modern global order is becoming more characterised by the debate about the relative decrease of US-led unipolarity and the emergence of various centres of economic, political and institutional power. The United States and its Western counterparts have been playing a major role in the determination of the global governance by the institutions of IMF, World Bank, WTO and G7. The increasing economic influence of emerging market and developing economies has, however, questioned this power concentration. IMF data demonstrate that emerging market economies and developing economies now contribute a larger portion of the global economy in terms of purchasing power parity than the advanced economies, indicating a structural shift in the world economy. (IMF)

BRICS has become a significant platform in the articulation of the interests of major non-

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Western and Global South economies in this changing context. The BRICS has found itself around the issues of reforming the global governance institutions, greater representation of developing countries, financial cooperation and South South partnership. The institutional value of it was augmented with the machineries of the New Development Bank and frequent summit declarations, by which member states have demanded a more representative and inclusive international order.

The Johannesburg Summit in 2023 was a significant landmark in the history of BRICS. Invitations to join the Johannesburg II Declaration were extended to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to become full members as of 1 January 2024. (BRICS) But later Argentina did not accept the invitation to join, and thus it is better to describe the 2023 decision as an invitation to expansion, not as an invitation to expand all six invitees. Recent BRICS fact sheets include Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia in the listing, although the practical status of Saudi Arabia has been reported with some ambiguity in various sources. Hence, this research considers the expansion as a dynamic phenomenon as opposed to a predetermined institutional phenomenon.

The expansion is significant in that it unites countries with strategic significance in the energy, trade routes, demography, development finance and regional diplomacy. Inclusion of Middle East and African states helps BRICS in asserting its representation of a broader constituency of Global South. Simultaneously, it also brings up critical questions about internal coherence, since the members of the BRICS are not similar in terms of political systems, economic priorities, security alignments and relations with the West. As noted in the Human Development Report 2023/24, which was released in early 2023, global cooperation is now being conducted in a context of polarisation, inequality and reconfigured interdependence, so the BRICS expansion is all the more topical to discussions about global order. (Human Development Reports)

The key research gap is that much of the existing discourse about BRICS expansion is mostly either theoretical, normative or geopolitical in nature. Literature outlines BRICS as a multipolarity indicator, although fewer studies empirically evaluate the idea of whether expansion does alter the balance of power in the world in quantifiable terms. This paper thus looks at BRICS growth not as a mere diplomatic symbolism but as a feasible experiment of multipolarity.

There are two research questions that guide the study. To start with, does BRICS expansion enhance multipolarity in the modern international system? Second, what is the effect of the expansion on the global economical, institutional and political power distribution? These are the key goals: to evaluate the economic significance of the extended BRICS, to examine its institutional contribution to the new world order, and to analyse its geopolitical implications to the new world order.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework:

Multipolarity is an international system whereby the power of the international system is shared between multiple centres as opposed to single dominant state. As compared to

unipolarity, which is characterized by the existence of only one powerful actor that will determine the outcome of global political and economic activities, multipolarity is the feature that indicates the presence of multiple influential actors that will shape the outcome of global political and economic processes. Kenneth Waltz (1979) considers that, multipolarity is a decentralised type of power that lessens the dominance of any given actor in the international system.

It is possible to distinguish two types of multipolarity hard and soft. Hard multipolarity relates with military strength, strategic alliances, and balance-of-power relationships, where the dominant powers are countered by other states. Soft multipolarity, in contrast, is a stronger force that is powered by economic strength, institutional influence, and normative power, which reflect the growing significance of interdependence and multilateral cooperation in global governance.

The paradigm shift of multipolarity can be examined using significant theories of international relations. Realism, especially structural realism, is concerned with the distribution of power and the survival of states in an anarchic system. In this light, BRICS emergence can be seen as a strategic measure by the emerging economies to respond to the Western domination. Neo-liberal institutionalism emphasizes the contribution of international institutions towards enhancing cooperation, and it implies that BRICS is not merely leveling the power, but also establishing alternative governing structures. In the meantime, Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) offers a critical perspective using the world-systems theory where BRICS can be seen as a coalition of semi-peripheral states that aim to challenge core dominance and improve their positions in the world hierarchy.

After its establishment in 2009 and its expansion in 2010, BRICS has grown to become a important geopolitical and economic platform. The 2023 expansion under the BRICS+ framework, reflects its desire to be a more inclusive alliance of emerging economies. Efforts to establish alternatives to the traditional Western-dominated financial systems, and to improve financial cooperation and stability are reflected in such institutional developments as the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement.

Johannesburg II Declaration also highlights the desire of BRICS to foster inclusive multilateralism and reform the world governance institutions. These changes suggest that BRICS is not only a political bloc but also an institution that helps to gradually shift to a multipolar world order.

Literature Review:

The multipolarity concept is based on the realist theory approach, whereby the world order is dictated by the amount of power held by the key states. Kenneth N. Waltz believes that a multipolar system develops when more than a few states have similar capabilities, which results in balancing behaviour and the loss of dominance by a single hegemon (Waltz, 1979). In this regard, BRICS can be frequently understood as a reaction of the emerging markets to have a more influential voice in the global governance.

Having been firstly conceived as an economic grouping, BRICS has now become a political and institutional platform. As Oliver Stuenkel observes, the bloc has come up with coordination mechanisms, such as the New Development Bank and Contingent Reserve Arrangement, aimed at reducing reliance on western-led institutions (Stuenkel, 2020). Formal statements, especially Johannesburg II Declaration (2023) focus on inclusive multilateralism and global governance institution reform, making BRICS a representative of the Global South.

Empirical research indicates the increasing economic role of BRICS. The emerging economies now contribute a substantial portion of the world GDP in a purchasing-power-parity sense, further supporting the claims of a new power balance. The literature however also warns that BRICS lacks internal cohesion because of geopolitical differences, particularly among the key members and this thereby limits its effectiveness as a unified bloc.

The growth of BRICS since 2023 has injected new debate on multipolarity due to its geographic and strategic expansion. Although expansion enhances its stake as a Global South coalition, it also makes the task of consensus-building more challenging. By and large, the extant literature indicates that BRICS is symptomatic of an ongoing shift towards multipolarity, yet its capacity to help radically transform the global power structures remains limited due to internal heterogeneity and the still dominant role of Western institutions.

Research Methodology:

This paper will use a mixed methodology to explore the effects of BRICS growth on the world power systems. The quantitative analysis concentrates on the most important indicators, including GDP share, trade flows, energy production, and military expenditure, whereas the qualitative component of the analysis focuses on the declarations of BRICS summits and the institutional framework, making it possible to evaluate it both empirically and contextually. The research is based on secondary data which is credible international sources such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as economic data, United Nations Comtrade as trade data and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute as military expenditure. The information on the policy is based on the official BRICS documents, especially on the Johannesburg II Declaration. Global power shift is considered the dependent variable, which is measured in terms of the alterations in the economic share, the influence on trade and the involvement in the institutions. The analysis uses trend-based and comparative analysis techniques to determine the change towards a new multipolar world order.

BRICS Expansion: Structure and Significance

The BRICS development is a progressive change in the conceptual grouping into a broader geopolitical and economic alliance. This grouping was officially institutionalised in 2009 with the first BRIC summit and the introduction of the countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China. In 2010, South Africa became a member of the bloc and increased its geographic representation to Africa and enhanced its identity as a Global South. One of the turning points was the 2023 Johannesburg Summit at which BRICS leaders decided to expand membership by inviting other countries including Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, marking the beginning of a new phase of expansion starting in 2024 (BRICS, 2023).

Inclusion of new members has a significant impact on the strategic profile of BRICS. Other countries invited and accepted include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran, which are the primary producers of energy in the world and have major influence in the oil and gas markets. The inclusion of the Middle East in the BRICS is geopolitically important to energy governance, according to the international energy agency (IEA, 2023). On the same note, the data of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries shows that such countries as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the key players in global export and production of petroleum (OPEC, 2023). In addition to energy, the addition of African members like Egypt and Ethiopia gives BRICS a broader geographic coverage, and a stronger presence in developing countries, especially in Africa and the Middle East.

The strategic impulse of the BRICS development is directly connected with the larger changes in the world political economy. One of them is the encouragement of de-dollarisation, which is a concern among member states on the issue of relying on the US dollar in global trade and finance. The statements of BRICS summits have stressed the importance of the increase in the use of local currencies in international transactions and the reform of the global financial architecture (BRICS, 2023). The other key factor is the energy security, because the inclusion of the leading energy producers provides greater influence by the bloc in the global energy market and in reducing vulnerability to being affected by external shock. The emerging relevance of BRICS expansion, as supported by energy outlook reports by the IEA, is the growing significance of emerging economies in both energy production and energy consumption (IEA, 2023).

Moreover, BRICS expansion is an indicator of a larger scale commitment to enhance South-South cooperation. The aim of the grouping is to provide a platform on which developing countries can coordinate their policies, improve economic cooperation and promote more inclusive global governance. Johannesburg II Declaration directly points out the role of multilateralism, development cooperation and greater representation of the Global South in international institutions (BRICS, 2023). Collectively, these factors suggest that BRICS growth is not just a mere symbolic expansion but strategic in its aim of restructuring global economical and geopolitical systems.

Empirical Analysis: Shifts in Global Power

The economic aspect of BRICS growth indicates an evident change of economic weight in the world, particularly when gauged by purchasing power parity. IMF-based BRICS reporting shows that BRICS contributed to approximately 40% of the world GDP on a PPP basis in the year 2024, whereas the IMF data page reports the G7 at approximately 27.96% of the world GDP on a PPP basis in the year 2024. Nevertheless, even in terms of nominal GDP, the G7 continues to be stronger, which implies that the BRICS expansion is merely a significant change in the real economic capacity and not a total replacement of the Western economic dominance. Such distinction between the PPP and the nominal GDP is significant in the sense that, PPP is better placed to measure domestic economic size whereas the nominal GDP measures better the global financial and market power.

(Table-01): BRICS vs G7 GDP comparison

Indicator	BRICS / BRICS+	G7	Interpretation
GDP share, PPP	Around 40% of world GDP in 2024	Around 27.96%	BRICS has stronger real-economy weight
GDP share, nominal	Lower than G7	Higher than BRICS	G7 retains financial-market dominance
Growth pattern	Faster in emerging economies	Slower in advanced economies	Long-term shift favours BRICS economies

The trade statistics have also shown the emerging strength of BRICS as a trading bloc. According to UNCTAD, the share of BRICS in world exports rose, starting with about 12% in 2003 to about 24% in 2024, with its share of global imports increasing correspondingly, starting with about 10%. As can be seen, intra-BRICS merchandise exports have reached US\$1.17 trillion in 2024, indicating that the bloc is becoming increasingly important as a political block as well as a trade network. Prepare a line chart that displays BRICS share of the world exports and imports of 2003 to 2024. The chart is to indicate the exports increasing by approximately 12 percent to 24 percent, and imports increasing by approximately 10 percent to 20 percent based on the UNCTAD data.

The BRICS financial architecture revolves around the New Development Bank. The BRICS countries have created the NDB to mobilise resources to fund infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS, emerging economies and developing countries. This does not wholly substitute the IMF or the World Bank, but it is an alternative source of development finance and an enhanced institutional capacity of emerging economies.

Another significant front that BRICS expansion enhances the strategic significance of the bloc is energy geopolitics. The fact that major energy producing states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran are included makes BRICS a lot closer to the world oil and gas markets. The IEA observes that approximately one out of five oil and LNG supplies worldwide pass through the Strait of Hormuz, and thus the Middle East is at the centre of energy security in the world. Thus, the expansion of BRICS in the Middle East contributes to the relevance of the bloc in energy politics and global politics of commodities.

Table 2. BRICS Energy Producers and Geopolitical Significance

Country	BRICS Status	Energy Type	Global Role in Energy Market	Geopolitical Significance
Russia	Core member	Oil & Natural Gas	Among the largest global producers and exporters of oil	Major supplier to Europe and Asia; influences global

			and gas (IEA, 2024)	energy security and pricing
Saudi Arabia	New member (invited/associated)	Crude Oil	One of the world's top oil producers and leading exporter; key OPEC player (OPEC, 2023)	Central to global oil supply stability and price regulation
United Arab Emirates	New member	Oil & Gas	Major oil exporter with growing gas sector (OPEC, 2023)	Strategic Gulf energy hub; strong influence in OPEC decisions
Iran	New member	Oil & Gas	Holds one of the largest oil and gas reserves globally (IEA, 2024)	Geopolitically significant due to sanctions and control over Strait of Hormuz
Brazil	Core member	Oil (offshore) & Bioenergy	Emerging major oil producer (pre-salt reserves) and biofuel leader (IEA, 2024)	Expands BRICS energy footprint to Latin America; diversification of energy sources

As shown in the table, BRICS expansion will play a significant role in positioning the bloc in global energy geopolitics by integrating some of the major hydrocarbon producers in different regions. The addition of Middle Eastern producers helps to gain more control over oil supply chains, whereas the gas dominance of Russia and the offshore production of Brazil are some of the factors contributing to the diversification. This geographic dispersion enhances the collective power of BRICS over the world energy markets, facilitating the overall shift towards a multipolar economic and geopolitical order (IEA, 2024; OPEC, 2023).

Discussion:

BRICS growth means that the formation is no longer merely a symbolic bloc, but it is yet to be a fully developed challenger to the Western-led global order. The fact that it has an increasing proportion in the global GDP, trade, population and energy production makes it have a significant structural significance. The fact that most of the energy producers and third world economies are included, gives it a stronger argument to represent the Global South. Nevertheless, BRICS continues to lack the institutional depth, coordination and financial capacity of policies that would replace or directly challenge institutions like the IMF, World

Bank or G7. Thus, BRICS must be perceived as a reformist and balancing platform as opposed to an entirely alternative global order.

One of the biggest challenges faced by BRICS is the conflict of unity and division. On the one hand, the member states have common interests in terms of lack of equality in global governance, inadequate representation of developing nations and reliance on western dominated financial systems. This common ground allows them to cooperate on matters like development finance, local currency trade and South South cooperation. Conversely, BRICS comprises nations with various political systems, economic frameworks, emphasis on foreign policies and security alignments. Such disparities inhibit its possibility to be a cohesive bloc in international politics.

Boundaries to multipolarity are notably observable in domestic conflicts and strategic competition. In the example of India and China, there are unsettled border issues and conflicting regional interests. Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have represented opposite sides of the West Asian politics, though diplomatic normalisation has led to a reduction in direct enmity. These divisions demonstrate that BRICS growth enhances diversity and, at the same time, makes the process of reaching a consensus more difficult. Consequently, BRICS can build multipolarity structurally but in a politically disjointed manner.

The other notable limitation is economic asymmetry. China is far the biggest economy in BRICS and has more trade, investment and manufacturing potential than other members. This raises a worry that BRICS multipolarity will not be balanced, with China having a disproportionate influence. In the case of countries like India, Brazil and South Africa, the question is to make sure that BRICS is not China-centric but an authentic plural platform of emerging economies.

In the context of global governance, the expansion of BRICS puts pressure on the need to reform global institutions like the UN Security Council, IMF and World Bank. It intensifies calls to have the developing countries better represented in the decision-making processes. In the case of developing countries, BRICS can provide another platform of diplomatic and financial support, particularly due to such mechanisms as the New Development Bank. Its advantages however will be determined by whether BRICS can deliver viable development finance, technology cooperation and trade opportunities as opposed to just political pronouncements.

In the case of India, there are opportunities and threats in the expansion of BRICS. It offers India with a space to enhance Global South leadership, propel multipolarity and diversify diplomatic alliances. Meanwhile India needs to strike a fine balance between its position in BRICS against the pre-eminence of China and its own strategic alliances with the United States, Europe, Japan and other powers. The stance of India is thus not anti-Western but multi-aligned. Among the BRICS, India can play the role of a balancing power, which guarantees the bloc to be inclusive, development-focused and not dominated by a single member of the bloc.

Conclusion:

This paper aimed to investigate the question of whether BRICS expansion is a substantive

change in the global power structures and to what extent this change adds to the emergence of multipolarity. The results show that BRICS has greatly expanded its global relevance, especially in the economic, trade and energy aspects. The move to take on key countries in the Middle East and Africa has increased its geographic reach and resource base and its increasing share of global GDP (especially in PPP terms) and trade represents a gradual redistribution of economic power away traditional Western centres. Meanwhile, there are institutional developments, such as the New Development Bank, which show an attempt to establish alternative mechanisms of governance, albeit on a smaller scale than the established institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank.

Answering the research questions, the analysis indicates that BRICS expansion does help to reinforce multipolarity, but in an uneven, partial manner. In economic terms, the bloc has come to acquire a lot of strategic power as a result of the addition of major oil and gas producing nations to the bloc. But politically and institutionally, BRICS is not yet organised into a fully cohesive or unified global actor. The internal divergence of the member states such as geopolitical conflicts, and economic capacity differences limit its capability in taking concerted action on significant matters of global concern. Thus, though BRICS increases the bargaining power of the emerging economies, it is not yet the consolidated alternative to the current global order.

According to these results, multipolarity is perceived as a new yet still transitional stage as opposed to a fully established global system. The existing international system is characterized by a mixed system where the features of unipolarity, multipolarity and institutional interdependence are intertwined. This transition is being accelerated by the BRICS expansion that redistributes economic and strategic power, but which does not yet replace the institutional and financial dominance of the Western-led systems.

The following are some of the key areas that should be used in future researches in order to enhance knowledge of this transformation. First, more empirical and longitudinal research on effects of BRICS expansion on global trade networks, financial flows and energy markets are needed. Second, studies are needed on the processes within BRICS, especially what economic asymmetry and political dispersion imply to the institutional cohesion. Third, more consideration should be paid to the influence of new technologies, digital currencies and alternative financial systems in the formation of multipolarity. Lastly, region-specific research, particularly in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia can yield information on the impact of BRICS expansion on the development paths and geopolitical orientations in the region.

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