

CHINA'S APPROACHES TO THE BRICS: REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS AND BILATERAL DIMENSIONS

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This paper provides a critical overview of China's strategy in the BRICS. In the wake of the expansion of the membership of the group with the inclusion of five new members —Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, UAE, and Egypt— in January 2024, and the shifting regional and global geopolitical situations, China's objectives and strategies in the institution gain significance for understanding how China is crafting its strategy as a rising power. While the fluid geopolitical situation due to sluggish global economic recovery, flaring up of conflicts, namely the Israel-Hamas war, Russia-Ukraine war with global economic and geopolitical consequences, and rising tensions between China and the USA make the expanded BRICS geopolitically significant, these changes also bear upon the bilateral and regional dynamics of relationships among member states and the very role of the institution as such. In this respect, this essay answers the following questions: whether and how do these factors shape the group's identity and role? In this respect, the essay contextualizes China's strategy in the BRICS within its more extensive approach to multilateralism in the last two decades.

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China in BRICS: Entanglement of Security and Geo-economics and Multilateralism

China's approaches to the BRICS —an 11-member group comprising states from Asia, Africa and Latin America —have gradually shifted in importance as part of its changing foreign policies and strategies to the international order in the post-Cold War period. And this shift is part of China's changing identity and status in the world as its economic and military power. China has gradually come to embrace international institutions, and international law, and use them in its interactions with the outside world. Thus, from 1970 onwards, when China joined the UN, it gradually joined almost every major institution.¹ However, it is only in the 21st century that China seems to have proactively embraced multilateral institutions as part of its foreign policies.² A significant part of this shift is its participation and promotion of the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), and New Development Bank (NDB), among others.

As such, China's participation in multilateral institutions forms one of the pillars of

1) Joseph Yu-Shek Cheng, *Multilateral Approach in China's Foreign Policy* (World Scientific: Singapore, 2018).

2) Sun Xuefeng, "The Efficiency of China's Multilateral Policies in East Asia (1997–2007)," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2010): 515–541.

China's strategy for the international order. While China pursues bilateral relations, it even prefers to use bilateral channels over others to take advantage in negotiations, China has put an emphasis on multilateralism, and participation and initiation of multilateral institutions. It has a member of almost all multilateral institutions namely, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and ASEAN+3. It has also expressed willingness to be part of other regional organizations namely, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). Its attempts to expand its influence in the BRICS region are thus part of the larger strategy.

China uses multilateral institutions to promote its image as a responsible power, advance its security and economic interests or thwart something that is against its interests from taking place.³ Chinese foreign policy also relies on normative narratives, which include “the Community of Shared Interests,” “peaceful rise,” and “developmental peace,” to justify its policies in terms of a larger good and interests of all.⁴

If we make conceptual and empirical intern-connections among these three dimensions of China's regional strategy with its key objectives, then it becomes clear how such a regional strategy pursued by China shapes the geopolitical and strategic dimensions.

BRICS and the Geopolitical Competition for a Greater Influence in Global South

BRICS emerged in the first decade of the 21st century at the peak of the “unilateral moment” of the U.S. predominance. Its formation reflected a more significant tendency to soft balance against the U.S.⁵ However, as it happens with most of the things in politics and foreign policy, states have only vague ideas about how their long-term objectives will be realized and the means to pursue them. BRICS's objectives were modest despite an oft-repeated goal of reforming the international economic order. In different degrees of intensity and reasons, this objective is shared by other founding member states. Therefore, its importance and goals in China's strategy in BRICS have reflected its changing power and strategies.

From the early years of 21st century, while its GDP and military power have doubled, its strategy has also changed. It has aggressively pursued an agenda to expand its influence in existing multilateral institutions, namely the United Nations, and has

3) Mark Beeson, “Asia's Competing Multilateral Initiatives: Quality versus Quantity,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2019): 246-247.

4) Chung Chien-peng, “The ‘Good Neighbour Polic’ in the Context of China's Foreign Relations,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2009): 107-123; Zhang Dong, “The Concept of ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in China's Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications,” *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (2018): 196–207.

5) Yi Edward Yang, “China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 30, No. 128 (2021): 299-313.

embraced participation in various types of multilateral institutions and forums. A clear indication of China's strategic use of multilateral institutions is the promotion of multilateral institutions where it holds leverage and becomes part of even not-so-influential institutions in different regions ranging from.

China's diplomatic approach to engaging with countries as a group and bilaterally also reflects an emerging approach in China's diplomatic practice or "forum diplomacy".⁶ For instance, China holds the annual Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) with 53 countries from Africa, the China-Latin American and Caribbean Forum (China-CELAC), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), and the first China-Central Asia Forum. These diplomatic efforts aim to bring in more countries into institutions and dialogue forums where China has a more significant say. In addition, the aim is also to evolve a China-friendly view of countries on specific issues, namely, one China policy, issues of human rights violations, and the push for a narrative that China is a peaceful and benign power.

Therefore, China's efforts to proactively promote the expansion of the BRICS since 2017 form part of these more considerable changes in China's diplomatic strategies amidst changing geopolitical situation. Although all founding members agreed to expand the group in 2022, China has been by far the most fervent supporter of the same. During this period, it has advocated the candidature of a range of countries covering different sizes of GDP and regional influence, and, crucially, countries with which China has developed friendlier relationships in the last few years. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one big factor for building influence but not the sole one.

For example, while the Johannesburg Summit agreed upon criteria that countries with certain economic weightage and regional influence from developing countries would be inducted, China has advocated for Pakistan, which has close geopolitical relations with China, five newly inducted countries, and has consistently articulated its position to bring in a greater number of countries. In brief, China's goals and vision of BRICS have shifted. China's diplomatic strategy has framed the BRICS as a platform for solidarity among developing countries, advocated for countries it has friendly relations with, and the fact that it has also called for a more significant and proactive geopolitical role of the BRICS, for instance, in articulating voices of developing countries on issues such as the Israel-Hamas war.

6) Devendra Kumar, "China and Central Asia: Ambitions and Great Power Signalling," Politeia Research Foundation, 14 July 2023, available at <https://prfworld.org/china-and-central-asia-ambitions-and-great-power-signalling/>; Paul Nantulya and Leland Lazarus, "Lessons from China's Forum Diplomacy in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean," Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 22 January 2024, available at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/lessons-from-chinas-forum-diplomacy-in-africa-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

BRICS Expansion: More Weightage yet Greater Divergence?

With the inclusion of five new members, the expanded BRICS represents greater diversity in terms of regional representation, economic weight, and population. They are all bound by a set of criteria, principles, and rules, which emphasize on the fact that decisions are taken with consensus, represent the interests of developing countries, and should not impose sanctions on other BRICS countries that are not authorized by the United National Security Council (UNSC), among others.⁷ Therefore, the expansion of the BRICS is a significant move because more countries with regional influence and economic power have come together and their commitment not to impose non-UNSC authorized sanctions limits the powers of the USA which requires compliance by regional powers for sanctions.

However, the inclusion of countries with diverse interests and foreign policy approaches opens up a space for the possibility of the BRICS getting stuck due to differences among member states. Added to that, given that China and Russia are pushing for a greater geopolitical role of the BRICS in articulating the collective voice of developing countries on regional and global geopolitical issues, this is likely to push greater divergence among member states about the identity and role of the institution.

All member states seek and agree on the need for global governance reform, including the reform of UNSC. In addition, every member emphasizes greater economic cooperation and exchanges beyond the hegemony of the global trade and financial system by U.S. dollar in different measure and degrees shaped by their respective national economic and foreign policies. However, Brazil, India, and South Africa have expressed hesitation in projecting the BRICS's role in geopolitical issues due to their respective balancing foreign policies between the U.S. and its European allies, and China, on the other hand. While Russia is also seeking to project the geopolitical role of BRICS in a bid to maintain its diplomatic space in the developing world amidst its war with Ukraine, its policies on this issue align with China. As a result, the inclusion of new members is likely to complicate the consensus among member states about the identity and role of the BRICS.

Bilateral relations among member states will also bear upon nature of the evolution the BRICS. Notably, China's push for an expanded role of BRICS, at a time when its geopolitical competition with the USA and India in the global south is rising, is a major factor. China has been an ardent supporter of expanding BRICS membership since 2017 in an effort to bring in countries closer and build BRICS as a platform for non-western countries, which may not be allies but are bound by common interests.

7) "BRICS Membership Expansion: Guiding Principles, Standards, Criteria and Procedures," November 2023, available at <https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/BRICS-Membership-expansion-guiding-principles-criteria-and-standards-2023.pdf>

However, this has not gone down well with India, Brazil, and South Africa. Their approach to membership expansion, for example, has been cautious, and so has been their articulations of the institution's role as a platform for seeking greater economic cooperation and global governance reform. However, wider discussions among strategic communities of these countries underscore their urge to use BRICS as a platform for balancing their economic and foreign policies while refraining from indicating its role in the emerging binaries of the U.S. and its allies versus others.

Conclusion

To conclude, China's diplomatic approaches and objectives align with its larger geopolitical interests and diplomatic approach, which is to engage with countries both bilaterally and through multilateral platforms. Particularly, China wants to promote multilateral institutions that can become a bulwark against the influence and power of the USA and its allies. In the same vein, these institutions are projected to become a platform for countries whose broader interests align with those of China. For example, the criteria that BRICS members should not impose non-UNSC authorized sanctions is consequential if and when the U.S. and its allies impose sanctions on China. Similarly, greater economic cooperation and improvements in bilateral economic and political relations with member states are goals that China seeks to achieve other objectives, such as shifting to a global financial order in which the U.S. dollar no longer holds hegemony.

However, more countries in the institution mean diversity of voices and interests, which given that decisions are taken by a consensus and China is pushing the institution to bear greater responsibility in geopolitical issues, it will lead to divergence.