

RUSSIA'S BRICS PRESIDENCY AMID INCREASE IN MEMBERSHIP: WHAT LOOMS AHEAD?

DOI: [10.58867/LSHZ3296](https://doi.org/10.58867/LSHZ3296)

The BRICS transitioned from the Group of Five to the Group of Ten, but what seems to be the demonstration of power may be a challenge, not a reward. Russia's 2024 BRICS presidency is extremely important for the grouping's future with important decisions to be made on economic cooperation priorities and requirements for future newcomers. In this article, the author presents his view on the nature of the BRICS membership extension, and how it would affect the forum in years to come based on new BRICS members' positions analysis, and also defines what should be done immediately to secure the future of BRICS as an efficient and attractive cooperation mechanism.

Alexander Ignatov*

Keywords: BRICS, Russia, Global Governance,
Russia in BRICS, BRICS Governance.



TPQ

Winter 2023/24
BRICS Special Issue

* Alexander Ignatov is PhD in Political Science; Researcher, Center for International Institutions Research, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow; Visiting Scholar at Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

2 023 turned out to be a very important year for the global governance. Two significant institutional pillars of the international system – the Group of Twenty (G20) and BRICS, decided to extend their membership – the African Union was invited to join the G20 with initially six countries (Argentina, Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Ethiopia) being approved to embark on the BRICS platform. Later, after the presidential elections the new Argentinian cabinet recalled the formal application to join the grouping. Invitation of new members representing the global majority reflects the recent trend towards greater representation of developing countries' interests on the global stage that also contributes to an increase in the overall legitimacy of the global governance system drifting away from the pro-Western, “unjust” model of international cooperation.

As a reasonable decision from the conceptual perspective, the enlargement of the BRICS membership is a mixed blessing. Transition from the “Group of Five” to the “Group of Ten” requires from the new players something above and beyond formal attendance at annual summits giving a picture of having a hand on global politics, but also full participation in activities of dozens of working mechanisms covering more than 30 spheres of mutual interest, and, ideally, further implementation of decisions made – otherwise, why bother? Won't the BRICS effectiveness as a cooperation mechanism become the first victim to make the good picture?

As one of the founding BRICS nations, Russia is a capable and experienced global governance player. However, the context of its 2024 BRICS presidency is as far from three past examples (2009, 2015 and 2020) as the sky above us all from the earth under our feet. The COVID-19 pandemic, growing tensions between Russia and the West, recent tragic terrorist act in Moscow, the BRICS transition from a compact club of one-minded nations to the Global South avantgarde – all of that make us think about the world as a totally different place. In the “old world” adherence to an established agenda was one of the efficiency indicators; the new rulebook of global politics is full of hints that considerations of prestige and loyalty should replace the first fiddle. It cannot but certainly would change the very nature of BRICS as a cooperation mechanism. The question is what to expect from such a dramatic shift.

BRICS Plus Five = Equals Ten?

Most of all, the very diverse nature of new membership should threaten the BRICS scholars. The old BRICS membership was based on a loose but at least easy-to-explain concept of “five continents = five nations” with Brazil representing “non-Western America”, South Africa – the African continent, Russia, India, and China – Greater Eurasia. With introduction of Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE the BRICS incorporates a new sub-region – the Middle East along with the proliferation of “African block” now comprising South Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia. In the new configuration, the

Latin America remains underrepresented with only Brazil to having a word.

The BRICS is definitely transitions from a geography-based representation to a way more controversial alignment method based on situational considerations. Both Russia and China as the BRICS leaders are keen on enlarging their presence in Africa, with Russia acting more politically and China opening cashflow to the local economies; from that perspective, inclusion of Egypt and Ethiopia (and Saudi Arabia with the UAE to a large extent if we take them as leaders in the Arab world covering the north of the targeted continent) looks more or less logical. However, it does not give a clue how the BRICS as a grouping would win from enlargement besides “making a splash”.

Next comes the obvious challenge of bringing the new membership to the global governance routine. In 2006 the BRIC started from a high position with two founding countries (Russia, and China) to be permanent UN Security Council (UN SC) members, and a duet of Brazil-India to be seriously considered the primary candidates for inclusion in the UN SC contributing much to their estimated international prestige also empowered with economic prospects. Regardless of formal status, all four BRIC nations were considered experienced in shaping the international agenda. With that premise, dubious decision to invite South Africa (rather than Nigeria that back in time was considered a more suitable candidate based on growth assumptions¹) did not change much in overall decision-making capacity of the grouping with South Africa taking more proactive position of a gatekeeper to Africa later on.

Referring to the new BRICS members, we see that only Saudi Arabia combines both a respectable international position and considerable experience as a global governance actor. The Kingdom did well amid the 2020 pandemic being in position of the G20 host party. The Group of Twenty lagged behind in action that year causing wider criticism, but after all decided to suspend international debt service for the most vulnerable countries, and also demonstrated full support for the World Health Organization against the backdrop of accusations regarding the Organization’s involvement in China’s authorities attempts to conceal the real scope of the pandemic.² Decisions made in Riyadh were later on reenforced in the successive G20 summits in Rome in 2021 and on Bali in 2022 proving the country’s ability to have a firm hand on the process. No other new BRICS party can be compared with Saudi Arabia in terms of economic power.

1) V. Shubin “South Africa in the BRICS: Last but not Least,” *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No 2 (2015): p. 229-247 (in Russian and English). DOI: [10.17323/1996-7845-2015-02-229](https://doi.org/10.17323/1996-7845-2015-02-229)

2) Interfax, "US senator demands WHO CEO fired for 'covering up' China." <https://www.interfax.ru/world/702315> (accessed 28 March 2024) (in Russian)

Egypt, Ethiopia, the UAE, and Iran look like a way less compelling candidates. Iran's international position is probably the most challenging among the new members with dozens of active sanctions being imposed since 1979. Noteworthy its long-lasting proxy conflict with Saudi Arabia with the two parties came to a decision to re-establish diplomatic ties only in March 2023 after years of hostilities.³ Another line of tensions is the Egypt – Ethiopia clash over the usage of Nile River water, with parties failing recently to achieve any tangible results through negotiation channels.⁴ Ethiopia itself is in danger of another round of internal conflict with the federal government, which is struggling to settle a final deal with the Tigray rebels.⁵ The UAE is more or less stable in any aspect including their external affairs, but when it comes to choosing sides, Riyadh tends to solidify with the Saudis that was set clear in the UAE decision to cease diplomatic ties with Tehran in 2016 (resumed in 2022).⁶

All these considerations are worrisome. The BRICS's unique ability to settle decisions based on consensus is something that even the G20 does not possess – we should recall the USA's exclusion from the G20 collective decision to promote the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate made in 2019. It's hard to imagine how the former belligerents would decide on matters relating to regional security – the topic widely discussed on the BRICS margins for more than a decade; how the parties would reach agreements on implementation of the BRICS decisions on promotion of national currencies; how the BRICS agenda on ICT development would look like taking into consideration obvious gap between the parties in terms of digital economy development, etc. Instead of focusing on building in-block solidarity among already established and capable partners, all successive host parties starting with Russia would deal with inevitable growing internal fractures.

As for the 2024 Russia's presidency we shall talk about the BRICS plus Five, or the BRICS plus Four if we consider Saudi Arabia to be a reliable partner with whom all the BRICS "old" nations have established forum-type connections thanks to the G20. Recent additions look more like proponents of taking something from the grouping rather than giving.

3) Al Jazeera, "What Countries Have Normalised Relations with Iran after Saudi detente?" 24 September 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/24/what-countries-have-normalised-relations-with-iran-after-saudi-detente> (accessed 28 March 2024).

4) The National News, "Egypt says Deadline over for Ethiopia Dam Negotiations after Talks Fail," 19 December 2023. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/12/19/egypt-ethiopia-gerd-nile-dam/> (accessed 28 March 2024)

5) A. Ross, "Ethiopia just ended one war. Is another one beginning?" *Reuters*, 8 August 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-just-ended-one-war-is-another-one-beginning-2023-08-08/> (accessed 28 March 2024).

6) Iranintl, "Trade Offers Economic Diplomacy Channel Between UAE And Iran," <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202309115082> (accessed 28 March 2024).

To Make 2024 a Success Story and Beyond

Whether we take the BRICS membership extension with a round of applause or with moderate caution, the decision made in Johannesburg in August 2023 is still a crisis factor for the BRICS. How the grouping would look like in years is hard to say for now, but it fully depends on how Moscow would spend the rest of the year.

The ultimate goal of Russia in the BRICS remains to consolidate the minds and actions of those ready to challenge the agenda proposed by the Group of Seven and re-translated through the G20 and other channels. If there had been no conflict in Europe, Moscow would have embarked more on providing material benefits, just like its Eastern counterpart. Still, under current circumstances newcomers shall ideally take the costs of new alignment at their expense without explicit proposal of immediate gratification. Enlarged BRICS under Russia's 2024 presidency is not a donation club, but a sweatshop, and the point here is to avoid taking extra obligations while receiving favors guaranteeing that Russia would never be isolated under the Western pressure.

This principle – receiving more than giving, shall be the guiding light for those responsible for a new BRICS Economic Cooperation strategy edition for another five-year period. Tremendous challenges of the future shall be treated as a shared burden, not a headache for more prosperous ones free-heartedly sharing the fortune with junior partners. The BRICS itself and Russia in particular do not need “partners of fortune” ready to advocate only when there is a payment check on the table, but those who willingly join the adventure of building something new, something just and reliable.

To make it so, Moscow shall cease the continuing process of the BRICS institutional proliferation and strongly focus on two things: 1) revitalization of previously established working mechanisms; and 2) introducing newcomers to the plethora of cooperation formats. In other words, work shall be guided by the concept of quality over quantity. With dozens of working groups, programs, platforms, forums, and other formats established in more than a decade of cooperation, the BRICS demonstrates great achievements in providing room for deeper bilateral partnerships with multilateral agreements rarely having their golden hour. The only major exception is the New Development Bank, but new circumstances require a new great deal.

Finally, the new round of membership enlargement shall be considered as a matter of distant future, at least no sooner than two other things would be realized. First, new members shall demonstrate adherence to the BRICS principles and prove that they are capable of making a good image on the global governance stage. Second, the introduction of new members shall be based on a strict set of requirements – not only expression of intent, but also macroeconomic soundness, global political

profile, internal stability and, ideally, non-involvement in regional political tensions – the list of requirements should smooth future rounds of membership extension and shorten inevitable shock of growth to the period in-between two successive national presidencies that usually equals one full year.