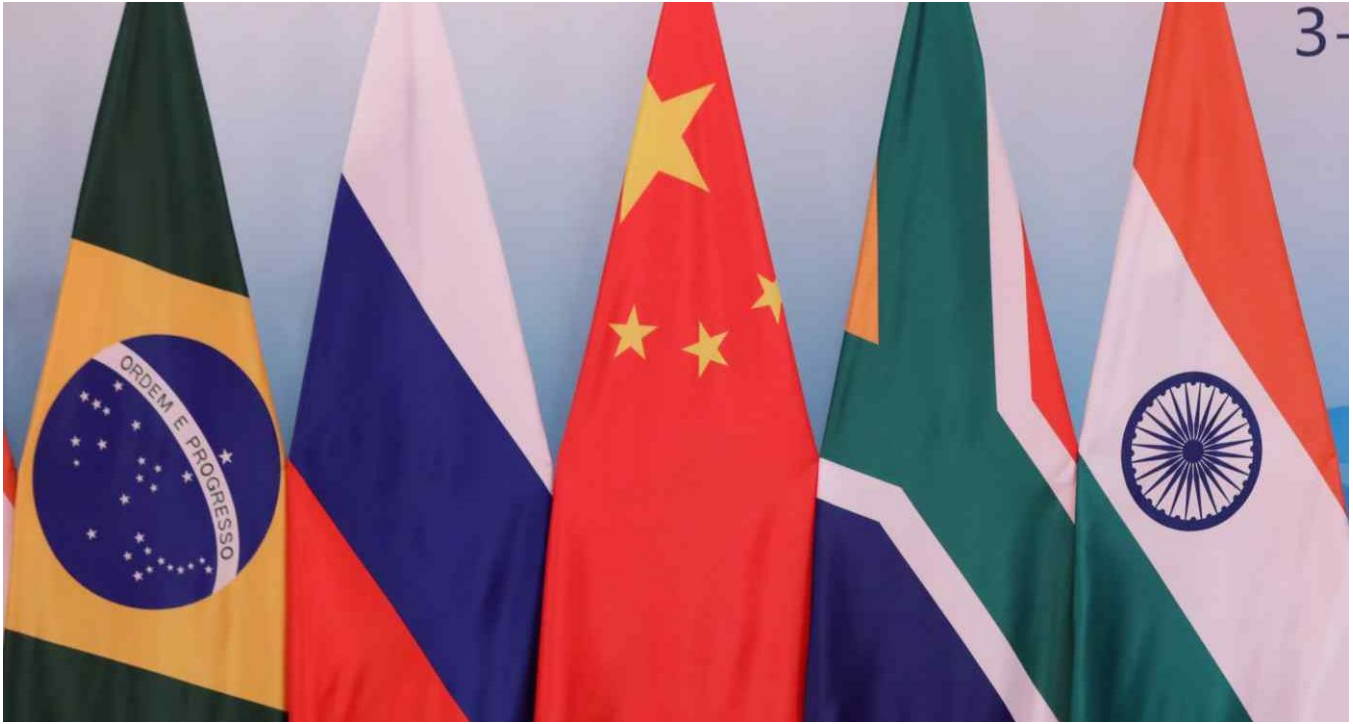


BRICS shows its usefulness, despite clear limitations

Emerging economy bloc serves its members in different ways



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National flags of the BRICS nations: Member countries in the group are becoming less and less like-minded. © Reuters

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The 14th summit of the BRICS group of countries -- Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa -- commences today in China, where it is being hosted virtually by President Xi Jinping.

The fact that BRICS continues to exist and make progress, notwithstanding intensified military tensions between China and India as well as differences among member states over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, shows that this is an institution that still partly serves the national interests of its constituent members.

From China's standpoint, BRICS remains a useful instrument to thumb its nose at the West and demonstrate that an alternative world order is possible without either the presence or the leadership of the United States or Europe.

In recent years, China has prioritized Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative as its prime strategic vehicle for upturning the Western-designed global system. But Beijing is sensitive to criticisms of the BRI as a unilateral and hegemonic enterprise.

Hence China's perseverance with BRICS, which predates the BRI, to help portray itself as a benign team player in contrast to what it denounces as America's bullying and exploitation of poorer nations.

Chinese Communist Party-run media outlets have promoted this year's BRICS summit by hailing "multilateral cooperation with non-Western styles, forms and principles" and crediting the BRICS for having "broken the imagination of the U.S. and the West."

By inviting several heads of state of "relevant emerging markets and developing countries" from Asia, Africa and Latin America to join BRICS leaders for a high-level virtual dialogue on June 24, following the summit meeting, China is trying to prove its leadership in the Global South and push for a BRICS plus grouping that can challenge the Western liberal international order.

For India, though, the juxtaposition of a supposedly multilateral and consultative China with a neocolonial West is not convincing. India also seeks a reordering of the international system to secure a greater voice for developing countries, but it is disillusioned with growing Chinese aggression and expansionism.

When BRICS was first conceived in 2006, China was perceived as a softer power that was one among a dozen or so fellow emerging market economies. But today, China has well and truly emerged, with no peer except the U.S.

Chinese foreign policy under President Xi has been pushy and bellicose toward Asian neighbors with whom it has territorial disputes. Since 2020, violent skirmishes and a long-drawn-out standoff between tens of thousands of Chinese and Indian troops at the disputed Himalayan borders have confirmed to India that China is its main adversary.

In these circumstances, India's rationale for staying in BRICS is not to validate China's international leadership. Rather, New Delhi feels it worthwhile to remain within the BRICS group to check Chinese expansionism by tying Beijing down with multilateral processes.

The institutional design of BRICS over the past 15 years does not permit China to trample over the other four member countries. For example, the New Development Bank established by the BRICS nations, which has disbursed loans of over \$25 billion worldwide, is equitably structured and not a handmaiden of China. India thus sees that it can act to internally balance China by playing the BRICS card.



The headquarters of New Development Bank in Shanghai: The bank is equitably structured and not a handmaiden of China. © FeatureChina/AP

In 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi refused to attend the BRICS summit in Xiamen, China, until Beijing rolled back its troops from a disputed point in the Doklam area where the borders of Bhutan, China and India intersect.

Ahead of this year's summit too, India reportedly snubbed China's bid to host an in-person BRICS summit owing to the unresolved border standoff, thereby forcing China to make do with a virtual summit. By threatening to deprive China of the prestige it seeks to harness from BRICS, India has sought to raise the costs of Chinese territorial expansionism.

As to Russia, it sees BRICS as an affirmation of its own importance and a rebuff to the Western campaign to isolate Moscow after its calamitous invasion of Ukraine.

While much has been said about a China-Russia strategic alliance becoming tighter as a result of the Ukraine war, Moscow is acutely conscious of its overall inferiority compared to Beijing. Russian President Vladimir Putin values BRICS for diversifying his partnerships and not relying solely on China, which overshadows Russia in power.

Brazil and South Africa cooperate within BRICS because it offers status-affirmation benefits to both. Brasilia voted against Russia over Ukraine at the United Nations, but Pretoria blamed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and defended Russia.

Yet, Brazil and South Africa receive validation in their respective continents by being part of the BRICS. The notion that Brazil is the natural leader of Latin America and South Africa is the main power of Africa is strengthened by these two nations' visibility on a global platform like BRICS.

BRICS leaders often talk of sustainable development goals, financial inclusion, digital public goods and a multipolar world order. Underlying these technocratic phrases is a barebones calculus: BRICS is becoming less and less like-minded, but it continues to meet specific interests of each member state.

BRICS will remain functional, if not spectacular, as long as this logic holds.