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The Geopolitical (In)Significance of BRICS Enlargement

KEY MESSAGES

- The original BRICS grouping of five was not a multilateral security alliance like NATO, and neither does the recent expansion of BRICS resemble the expansion of NATO
- The members of the expanded BRICS are divided between those that are largely hostile toward the West in general and the US in particular (Russia, Iran, and China) and those that have differences with the West but also cooperate with it (all the rest)
- There are serious tensions between some BRICS+ members that could lead to conflict – or already have. In addition to serious friction between China and India within the earlier five member BRICS, the expanded ten members includes tensions between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other, and between Egypt and Ethiopia
- Although Moscow and Beijing have been closely cooperating with each other on the basis of their joint opposition to “US hegemony” and the “Western liberal international order,” there exists latent tension between them over border issues
- The US, the EU, and other Western governments should avoid negative overreactions to BRICS expansion in ways that might encourage the members to overcome their divisions. Instead, Western governments should continue to work with those BRICS+ members willing to cooperate with the West

At the August 2023 BRICS summit, the existing members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) invited six more countries to join their ranks: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (The newly elected president of Argentina, though, decided that Argentina would not join BRICS after all.) Several other governments have expressed an interest in joining, and

it would not be surprising if further rounds of expansion occur.

All five previous BRICS members as well as the new ones are non-Western governments that have varying degrees of disagreement with the West (especially with the US and the EU) about policy issues and even basic values. There is concern in the West, then, that the expansion of the BRICS from five to ten members (and possibly more in the

future) could pose an increasing security challenge to the West.

Yet while the potential for this may exist, it is important to understand that the five-member BRICS itself was never a cohesive group, due to serious differences among its members. Further, the expanded BRICS (or BRICS+) has even more such differences, and these are not something that their joining BRICS+ is likely to alleviate. In addition to differences between BRICS members, there is also a divide between those BRICS members which are seriously at odds with the West in general and the US in particular (Russia, China, and Iran), and those that have some differences with the West, but also cooperate with it on numerous common interests (virtually all the others). It is important, then, for the US, the EU, and other Western governments to keep this in mind when considering how to respond to this latest BRICS expansion, and future ones that may well occur.

DIFFERING SECURITY INTERESTS WITHIN BRICS+

The first thing to note about the expanded BRICS is that it is not a multilateral security alliance like NATO. There is no agreement binding BRICS members like Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty declaring that an attack on one is an attack on all and requiring them to assist one another if attacked. Nor does anything like this appear to be even contemplated by the expanded BRICS members.

There has, though, been some bilateral security cooperation among some of the members. Between 2008 and 2022, Russia sold weapons to each and every country now a member of BRICS+, ranging from a high of over USD 29 billion worth to India and a low of USD 12 million worth to Saudi Arabia (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2023). China sold a more modest amount of weaponry during this period to most other BRICS+ members, including USD 423 million worth to Saudi Arabia (SIPRI 2023). Smaller amounts of weaponry were sold by Brazil to India and Saudi Arabia, by South Africa to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, by the UAE to Egypt, and by Iran to Russia (SIPRI 2023). In May 2023, US Ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety accused South Africa of providing arms and ammunition to Russia – a charge that the South African government denied (Eligon 2023).

But the newer members of the expanded BRICS as well as Brazil and India have also been substantial buyers of Western weapons. During this same 2008–2022 period, the US alone sold weapons to eight of the BRICS+ governments (Russia, China, and Iran be-



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ing the notable exceptions), including USD 2,949 million worth to Egypt, USD 4,785 million worth to India, USD 8,948 million worth to the UAE, and USD 20,640 million worth to Saudi Arabia (SIPRI 2023). Nor does it appear that joining the expanded BRICS is going to alter the willingness of these four governments in particular to continue buying from the US and other Western arms exporters – or the willingness of the latter to sell weapons to the former.

Indeed, even though Saudi Arabia and the UAE have both joined BRICS+, both have also been seeking closer defense ties with the US (Bronner 2023; Szuba 2023). Being seen to join an organization with three of the US's greatest adversaries (Russia, China, and Iran) may even be part of a strategy on the part of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt in particular to induce the US both to do more for them, stop criticizing them on their human rights records, or hold back on weapons sales if Washington wishes to prevent them increasing even further their cooperation with America's adversaries. Similarly, India's long-standing membership in BRICS has not prevented it from pursuing security cooperation with the US, Japan, and Australia via the loose "Quad" framework (Malhotra 2023).

CRACKS IN THE BRICS

In addition to ongoing instances of defense cooperation between BRICS+ governments on the one hand and the US and other Western governments on the other, there are also instances of serious differences between BRICS+ members that could either result in conflict between them or already have.

One of the most serious of these, predating the formation of the original five-member BRICS, is tension between India and China over their common border, Chinese military and economic support for Pakistan (which also has an ongoing border dispute with India), and Chinese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean. In 1962, China and India fought a brief border war in which Beijing got the better of New Delhi. Tensions have continued and conflict has occasionally occurred, including in December 2022 (Miller and Harris 2022). The publication in August 2023 of a Chinese government map showing territory currently controlled by India – including the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh as being "South Tibet" – indicates the possibility of further, even broader conflict (Rahman 2023). The fact that both China and India (as well as Pakistan) possess nuclear weapons makes this possibility even more ominous (Rajeev and Stephenson 2023).

It is India's disputes with China that have motivated New Delhi to move somewhat away from its traditional non-aligned stance and cooperate with the US, Japan, and Australia – all three of which also have security concerns about China – in the Quad format. India has also been buying more arms from the US and other Western governments. India, though,

has also continued its close ties to Russia (which has been the main supplier of weapons to India) despite Russia's increased economic dependence on China since the outset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 (Menon and Rumer 2022). New Delhi may well fear that if it criticized Moscow over the Ukraine war or stopped buying either arms or petroleum from Russia, then Putin might move even closer to Beijing than he already has and might not be willing or able to try to restrain hostile Chinese behavior toward India. Putin, for his part, has sought to maintain close ties with these two rivals. Indeed, Russia may benefit from their ongoing rivalry, as both have been the largest buyers of Russian weapons despite each being wary about how much Moscow sells to its rival. Further, there really has not been progress toward conflict resolution between China and India. To the extent that there has been some degree of conflict mitigation, this has come about through bilateral Chinese-Indian negotiation and not through outside efforts by their common friend Russia, much less by groupings like the BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that they are all members of (Kapoor 2023). It is doubtful that this will change as a result of BRICS expansion.

Instead, the recent expansion of BRICS has meant that the grouping now contains two other instances of persistent interstate tension. One of these is that between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the other. In Yemen, Iran has supported the Houthis, who have taken over most of the north, while Saudi Arabia has mainly supported what remains of the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the UAE has supported southern secessionists (Center for Preventive Action 2023). Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also accused Tehran of supplying the missiles and drones with which the Houthis have attacked targets inside both Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Nevola 2023). The UAE also has a longstanding dispute with Iran over three islands in the Persian Gulf which the Shah seized right before the United Kingdom withdrew from the Emirates in 1971 (Cafiero 2023). Finally, there has been a rivalry for religious leadership between Sunni Saudi Arabia (where Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities, are located) and Shi'a Iran ever since the latter's 1979 Islamic revolution (Khan 2020).

Russia set forth a "collective security" proposal for the Persian Gulf, but this did not gain much traction (Kozhanov 2021). More recently, China helped mediate the restoration of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Helping restore diplomatic relations (which the Saudis and Iranians probably could have done without outside help), however, is not the same as resolving conflict between opposing parties (Aboudouh 2023). It is not clear why their joining BRICS should enable that grouping or Russia, China, or any other member to resolve more readily conflict and tension between Saudi Arabia and the

UAE on the one hand and Iran on the other. Indeed, the fact that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been seeking a greater security commitment from the US indicates that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi do not see their membership in BRICS+ as leading to a resolution of their differences with Iran.

Another persistent instance of interstate tension that could lead to conflict within the expanded BRICS is that between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile River water issues – specifically how the impending completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project will reduce the flow of water to Egypt (and Sudan) via the Nile. Mediation efforts by Russia (among others) in the past have not been successful. China is a backer of the Ethiopian dam project and may not want to constrain Addis Ababa on this for fear of the precedent it would set for its own Mekong River dam projects, which affect water flow to downstream countries in Southeast Asia. And instead of ameliorating the dispute between Cairo and Addis Ababa, talks between them (and Khartoum) actually broke down just a few weeks after the August 2022 BRICS summit announcing that Egypt and Ethiopia would be joining the expanded group (Fenton-Harvey 2023).

Finally, there is one latent conflict between two original BRICS members: Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing agreed to resolve their border disagreement (over which there was fighting in 1969) as part of the process that led to the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Reuters 2008). Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi have also frequently proclaimed how close their relationship is (Davidson 2023). There are signs, though, that their border dispute has not completely ended after all. In the same August 2023 Chinese government map that showed Beijing's claims to territory it disputes with India and other countries, Beijing also laid claim to all of Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island in the Amur River that Russia and China agreed to share in 2008 (Sharma 2023).

Further, other maps have been published in China showing territory Russia previously “stole” from it as well as maps of the Russian Far East using Chinese geographical terms from before Russia gained this territory from China in the mid-19th century (Sohu.com 2019, 2023a and 2023b). Such maps are not official Chinese government claims against Russia, but they would not have been published if Beijing did not permit them to be. Russians must wonder why Beijing did so. It is possible that the longer the war in Ukraine continues and Moscow's economic dependence on Beijing increases, the more likely it is that Beijing may seek a “friendly settlement” of past wrongs that China suffered at the hands of Russia. Their common membership in BRICS would not appear to be an obstacle to this occurring. China, it must be emphasized, has not taken any such step yet. But if Beijing does, Moscow cannot turn to the West for support so long as its war with Ukraine continues.

In addition, the decision by the new conservative president of Argentina, Javier Milei, not to accept the invitation to join BRICS appears to have much to do with his poor relations with Brazil's leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Starcevic 2023).

So far, then, the BRICS format has not provided a conflict resolution mechanism for interstate tensions between its members. While Western governments might not relish the prospect of further BRICS expansion, there is little reason to think that it will become more proficient at this – especially if the further expanded membership encompasses even more bilateral disputes. Since the recent addition of new members appears to have required unanimous approval of the existing five, further expansion may thus require unanimous approval from eleven governments – a degree of consensus that might not be possible to achieve concerning the admission of certain aspirants. Yet even if it does expand further, the more internally fractious it is likely to become.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

Despite Western fears that the expanded BRICS is the forerunner of an anti-Western security alliance, the internal divisions within the grouping suggest that this is not something that is likely to emerge. The US, the EU and other Western governments, then, should not overreact to BRICS enlargement. Indeed, doing so risks leading to the counterproductive result of stimulating more cooperation within the expanded BRICS than might occur otherwise.

What Western governments should do instead is continue or even increase their cooperation with those BRICS governments that are willing to cooperate with the West in order to give them an incentive not to side fully with the more implacably anti-Western governments within BRICS (Russia, Iran, and China). There is even a case to be made for Western governments willing and able to do so to continue cooperating even with these most anti-Western BRICS governments in order to give them something to lose in their relations with the West, and hence an incentive to temper their hostility toward it.

One of the main purposes of BRICS is to serve as a forum to express non-Western grievances against the West as well as to articulate visions of world order that its members consider preferable to what they view as the prevailing “Western liberal democratic” one. Instead of ignoring this aspect of the BRICS grouping, Western governments should engage in a dialogue with BRICS governments (either separately or together) in an effort to flesh out what they mean. While criticism of the Western-dominated world order may be popular within BRICS, the Global South, and even within the West itself, visions of what to replace it with usually lack specificity or even set forth an image of a world dominated not by Western great powers but by non-Western ones – something that could

(indeed, should) alarm smaller nations within the Global South and even within the expanded BRICS. On the other hand, dialogue between Western governments and the expanded BRICS could identify areas of common interest where there could be fruitful co-operation – at least with those BRICS+ governments willing to cooperate with the West.

Since the expanded BRICS is essentially a G7 for non-Western states, then there should be formal dialogue between the G7 and the BRICS+. However, the expansion of BRICS, as well as the prospect of its further expansion, stands in stark contrast to the closed nature of the G7. The G7, then, should be expanded to include any and all fully democratic governments that wish to join (perhaps being referred to as the G-D – for democracy – or G7+ so that the number after G does not have to keep changing with the addition of new members). The inclusion of such governments in the developing world would help advance the idea that “the West” is an inclusive, and not an exclusive, grouping that developing countries that meet its democratic norms can aspire to join – much as the openness of the EU (and its predecessors) to new members has served to inspire European nations to meet EU norms. Membership of this grouping should even be open to democratic governments that are also members of the expanded BRICS.

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