

Power Asymmetries in BRICS: Serving the Global South or Entrenching Sino-Russian Interests?

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Abstract

Since becoming a political bloc in 2009, BRICS has expanded to ten members. This paper interrogates the evolving role of this formation, which aspires to be a powerful voice for the Global South at the international level. This ambition evokes comparisons to the Non-Aligned Movement, which ‘historically represented a collective voice of developing countries striving for independence, sovereignty, and international cooperation’ during the pre-1990 bipolar world. However, the contemporary multipolar landscape presents distinct challenges to its efforts to be a counterweight to Western hegemony. This paper argues that the grouping increasingly entrenches Chinese economic primacy and Russian geopolitical interests, marginalising smaller members and the broader Global South. Empirical evidence from key UN bodies is used to highlight limited BRICS engagement at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and divergent voting patterns within the UN Security Council (UNSC), underscoring institutional inertia. Financial and diplomatic asymmetries further enable Beijing and Moscow to dominate the bloc’s agenda, weakening its credibility as a vehicle for Global South solidarity. These internal imbalances could also undermine the very concept of multipolarity that BRICS claims to champion. Through a structural realist lens, this paper analyses UN voting records, trade imbalances and case studies, including the Democratic Republic of Congo’s cobalt supply chain, to reveal how disparities in representation, financial contributions and strategic priorities shape BRICS’ trajectory. The paper concludes with policy recommendations.

Keywords: Power Asymmetry; BRICS; Multipolarity; Global South; Interests; Russia & China; UN

Introduction

BRICS, initially an emerging economic grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, has evolved into a significant geopolitical actor with an expanding agenda beyond economic interests (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020). Since 2023, BRICS has grown to ten member countries, strengthening its global influence while adding complexity to reaching consensus and advancing international initiatives. The group’s institutional makeup, including the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserves Assets, demonstrates a strategic transition towards creating a more structured framework for global impact. BRICS members are also restructuring the international financial architecture, exploring solutions like local currency trading and intra-bank settlement systems (Pandor, 2023; Toussaint, 2024). These developments underscore their commitment to a ‘transformative agenda for a more equitable and representative global governance system’ (Pandor, 2023, p. 12).

Countries in the Global South have consistently voiced concerns about systemic inequalities rooted in colonial legacies and Western dominance in global institutions (Voss, 2020). They argue that

organisations like the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) systematically marginalise their participation in decision-making processes. This structural imbalance has fuelled calls for reforms to create a more inclusive governance framework that addresses developing countries' unique challenges. For instance, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has proposed creating a permanent African seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) to enhance the Global South's influence (Efemini, 2024). This proposal aligns with the Pact for the Future, adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2024, which supports reforming the UNSC and adjusting the international financial system to benefit the Global South (UNGA, 2024).

BRICS is portrayed as a counterweight to global disparities and a champion for a more equitable global order (Pandor, 2023). Alongside the Global South, BRICS is seen as an 'anti-hegemonic association' and a well-suited platform for democratising international relations (Bezerra & Lin, 2023, p. 335). However, questions persist about its ability to genuinely represent all its members and the broader Global South. The uneven political and economic power distribution within BRICS and the rise of new economic forces like 'cloud capital' (Varoufakis, 2024a) raise concerns about whether the group can effectively address existing disparities. Consequently, the Global South risks becoming marginalised in a rapidly evolving, tech-driven economic landscape.

Li, Uribe and Danish (2023, p. 19) argue that BRICS seeks to emulate the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which 'historically represented a collective voice of developing countries striving for independence, sovereignty, and international cooperation' during the pre-1990 bipolar world. This paper interrogates the validity of this exclusive and elitist club's claim to represent all marginalised countries in the South. Acemoglu (2023) contends that the expansion of BRICS inadvertently strengthens China's influence rather than creating 'a genuinely independent third grouping to provide a counterweight against both the China-Russia axis and US power.' This perspective invites scrutiny of the efficacy and intentions behind BRICS and its potential role in shaping future global dynamics.

Given the complex geopolitical and economic landscape, it is crucial to assess BRICS' effectiveness in representing the diverse interests of its member countries and the broader Global South. A significant challenge stems from the internal power dynamics favouring China and Russia, whose substantial privileges in the international system undermine the bloc's unity and effectiveness (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020). Both countries hold permanent seats on the UNSC and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) governing body. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the BRICS bloc has limited interaction with global bodies, including the UNSC and the ILO, revealing persistent 'internal asymmetries' (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020, p. 46). This disparity complicates efforts to advocate for meaningful reforms within international institutions.

The discourse about institutional reform in the global system has been ongoing for decades and represents a significant challenge for BRICS (Jetschke & Abb, 2019). The group's inclusion of China and Russia, already influential in the current global architecture, casts doubt on BRICS' ability to foster a genuinely multipolar world order. Nuruzzaman (2022) argues that BRICS functions more as a loose coalition than a formal alliance to challenge the US-led global system and establish alternative frameworks. While BRICS seeks to reform rather than overthrow the international order (Stuenkel, 2020), with China and Russia leading the bloc, a paradox emerges. Their entrenched influence raises concerns about their sincere commitment to the Global South, as their national interests could overshadow collective goals, potentially limiting BRICS' effectiveness in advancing marginalised voices.

This paper addresses the research question: Does BRICS effectively promote multipolarity, or does it primarily serve the interests of its dominant members, China and Russia? Applying structural realism

as the theoretical framework, qualitative methods will be employed to gather and analyse data from academic literature, media reports and official documents to evaluate BRICS' activities and internal dynamics (Blanche, Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The paper first assesses BRICS' alignment with the Global South by comparing it to the NAM to determine its effectiveness in supporting the broader Global South agenda as opposed to the interests of its dominant members. It then situates BRICS within the capitalist world order, exploring challenges in an evolving economic context. Next, it investigates coalition-building strategies in bodies like the UN and ILO, focusing on internal asymmetries affecting its representation of Global South interests. Finally, it considers whether BRICS expansion primarily serves Russia and China or aligns with a broader Global South agenda.

Research Methodology and Design

This study, employing a structural realist framework (Waltz, 1979), examines the role of BRICS in global governance by analysing power asymmetries. Utilising triangulated qualitative methods, including UN voting records, trade data and case studies, it prioritises authoritative institutional datasets and official declarations. The institutional engagement of BRICS was evaluated based on key criteria: voting coherence on priorities pertinent to the Global South, such as the reform agenda, and financial contributions to international bodies. While the analysis centres on structural power asymmetries, alternative explanations, such as domestic politics or neoliberal institutionalism, were acknowledged but excluded to maintain focus on systemic material disparities. The study recognises limitations, such as reliance on public records that may overlook informal negotiations or non-English sources. However, methodological triangulation mitigates these gaps, enhancing credibility and providing a robust framework for assessing BRICS' power dynamics and institutional engagement.

BRICS and the Global South: Echoes of the Non-Aligned Movement?

The term 'Global South' emerged in the 1960s to describe countries exploited by Western powers (Hogan & Patrick, 2024; Voss, 2020). Wealthier states' dominance through capitalism, imperialism, and neocolonialism is well documented. Economic theories, including world-systems theory and *dependencia*, further demonstrated the exploitation of peripheral regions by the core. Groups like NAM and the G77 resisted this system and pushed for changes. Despite challenges, the Global South continues to assert its autonomy (Hogan & Patrick, 2024). The rise of BRICS has revitalised the concept as a symbol of solidarity among developing countries (Kaushik, 2024). However, critics argue that the term is 'patronising and contradictory' (Beatie, 2024) and 'denies individual countries' agency by grouping them into a monolithic bloc' (Mohan, 2023), with additional concerns over its geographical inconsistencies. As a 'state of mind or being, which exists as an antithesis to the West' (Voss, 2020, p. 730), the Global South remains crucial in fighting for justice and equitable representation (Zhou, 2024; De Carvalho, 2023).

BRICS' primary goal is to be a positive catalyst for inclusive transformation towards a more equitable global order (BRICS, 2014). Scholars like Brands (2024) and Erin (2023) argue that BRICS's goals, especially in supporting the Global South, align with NAM's historical significance. Emerging during the Cold War's intense global polarisation, NAM sought to maintain autonomy from superpowers like the US and the Soviet Union and promote neutrality amidst the decolonisation wave and shifting power dynamics. Brands (2024) argues that understanding current global issues requires recognising their historical context. NAM's non-alignment strategy offers a model for developing countries today to avoid over-alignment with Russia and China (Acemoglu, 2023; Erin, 2023). However, the growing influence of these two powers on BRICS could undermine its ability to represent the diverse needs of developing countries, which remain targets of rivalry among global powers (Zhou, 2024).

While BRICS and NAM share overlapping membership and goals, questions persist about BRICS' ability to serve as a unified voice for the Global South. Multilateral institutions, historically dominated by Global North interests, are experiencing shifts as Global South countries assert more agency (Rakhra, 2024; Traub, 2022). Issues like vaccine inequality and the Ukraine conflict catalysed a new sense of unity among these countries. The anaemic power of the North has enabled this breakthrough in geopolitics and international bodies such as the WTO (Prashad, 2013). Although no single country represents the entire Global South, nations like South Africa led in the Israel genocide case and collaborated with others on vaccine access and climate financing. Gattolin & Véron (2024, pp. 2–3) argue that BRICS 'informality' and 'freedom of initiative' are its main strengths, allowing member states to act autonomously and address issues without formal group endorsement. However, overcoming the legacy of Western dominance requires ongoing collective action (Rakhra, 2024; Rizzi, 2023).

Unlike pre-1990, today's global challenges demand tailored responses from individual states or regional blocs due to their diverse impacts (Rakhra, 2024). Consequently, formations like BRICS, NAM and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) have become key players within the Global South. Interestingly, Erin (2023) argues that groups like BRICS revitalise the legacy of non-aligned nations, which have the potential to reshape the global political landscape. Malaysia's *New Straits Times* (2024) argues that the voice of the Global South has long been unheard, and BRICS could be the 'mike' to finally amplify it on the world stage. However, concerns remain about China and Russia's dominant interests within BRICS. Hadebe (2023) suggests that 'the world is entering a complicated era of 'civilised' third forces,' and *New Straits Times* (2024) warns that if China and Russia impose their will on other BRICS members, the bloc could mirror the P5. Some critics view BRICS as a tool for Chinese diplomacy (Acemoglu, 2023).

The notion that BRICS is a direct successor of NAM is contentious. The bloc's leading members, like Russia and China, have adopted foreign policies that diverge from traditional non-alignment principles. This is unsurprising because neither of them was ever part of NAM, with China being only 'a friend, though not a member' (Traub, 2022). These powers prioritise self-interest over broader commitments to the Global South. While many in the Global South critique the West 'for its neo- or post-colonial faults' (Rampini, 2024), not all countries, within or outside BRICS, align with China and Russia's ambitions. Also, their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination, established in 2014, reveals their alliance as more significant and hierarchical than other partnerships, as well as focused on their interests, from the Ukraine conflict to trade sanctions (Jochheim, 2023; Zhang, 2024). This dynamic suggests that these countries recognise the Global South's limited capacity to challenge the West, a reality acknowledged by NAM leaders in the past (Kharel, 2020).

Besides their close foreign policy alignment or 'superpower symbiosis' (Weitz, 2012, p. 71), China and Russia strengthen their ties with emerging Global South powers while intensifying their opposition-adversarial stance towards the US and the West (Zhang, 2024). This cooperation spans state-to-state diplomacy, multilateral forums like BRICS and the SCO, and initiatives such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation and the Russia–Africa Summit. Naik (2019, p. 71) describes this cooperation as a 'three-fold interaction' addressing Global South concerns. However, many countries gravitate towards China-dominated entities due to infrastructure needs, loans and economic incentives, usually at the expense of broader political considerations. Consequently, Traub (2022) contends that the West must demonstrate a genuine commitment to developing countries, including economic support, to regain their loyalty. This is a realisation that Western powers are lagging behind China in meeting the pressing needs of developing countries.

While concerns about China-Russia relations persist, the Global South remains a geopolitical reality that must be recognised for what it stands for. It continues to call out those responsible

for injustices and abuse of power. Western support for Israel exposes its hypocrisy and sparks backlash, a phenomenon mainly overlooked by Eurocentric scholars (Rampini, 2024; Rizzi, 2023). Some leaders caution against their countries being used as arenas for a new Cold War and urge Europe to reconsider its stance (Larson, 2022; The Wire, 2022). Although BRICS has the potential to lead the Global South, it struggles to gain the broad support that NAM commands. A Western diplomat reportedly observed at the 1992 Jakarta summit, 'A lot of these tiny nations are praying that the [Non-Aligned] movement can survive and advocate on their behalf because most of the nations are not capable of doing it for themselves' (Keethaponcalan, 2016, as cited in Kharel, 2020, p. 8). Ultimately, BRICS' success in representing the Global South depends on its willingness to move beyond being an exclusive club characterised by diplomatic soirées.

Locating BRICS in the Capitalist World Order

Despite the persistence of historical and geographical divisions, the influence of contemporary capitalism on geopolitical tensions has been understudied. Understanding BRICS' position within the capitalist world order is essential for evaluating its potential to address the concerns of the Global South. This analysis requires a closer look at the evolving dynamics of global capitalism and BRICS' relevance and position in the current international landscape.

Understanding the Current Global Economic Order: Transnational Capitalist Class and Cloud Capital

Capitalism's adaptability has enabled it to overcome traditional North-South divisions, giving rise to a transnational capitalist class with interests beyond national borders (Biel, 2012; Wei, 2020; Witt, 2017). This transformation accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's economic reforms, which invited Western capital into emerging markets (Wei, 2020). While this influx of capital has fostered economic growth, it has simultaneously deepened inequalities and exacerbated class divisions within and between countries (Nabil, 2022; Tricontinental, 2022). This new stateless capitalist elite has reshaped global class relations and created new forms of inequality. As capitalism evolves, US dominance, mainly supported by the dollar's supremacy, also influences global economic activity. No country is immune to US hegemony (Varoufakis, 2024a). This reinforces the need for a nuanced analysis of BRICS, particularly given its purported role as a counterweight to US/Western economic dominance.

Varoufakis (2024a) identifies three phases of post-war global capitalism. The first was the 'golden era of capitalism,' characterised by high growth, low unemployment and low inflation, which ended with the collapse of Bretton Woods due to the US trade deficit. The second phase saw the US exporting dollars to maintain global dominance despite its deficits, empowering its status as the world's reserve currency. In the current third phase, often referred to as 'techno-feudalism' (Dean, 2020; Varoufakis, 2024b), 'datafeudalism' (García, 2024) or 'techno-capitalism' (Hurtado, 2023), rapid technological advances have shifted capital into what is called 'cloud capital' (combining capital and technology), where labour and markets are still relevant but no longer central to capitalism's development (Lovink, 2024). This era has been marked by the rise of powerful digital platforms like Amazon, Alibaba and Tencent, which manipulate consumer behaviour, exploit labour and extract value without proper compensation (Hurtado, 2023). Despite its significance, current discourses in fields such as economics and international relations overlook the impact of the cloud economy on countries beyond the digital divide.

Cloud capitalism demonstrates three 'harmful tendencies': expanding commodification, creating new forms of alienation and subordinating life to private capital accumulation (Hurtado, 2023, p. 4). This has led to a powerful elite, or 'cloudalists', who have unprecedented influence over the global

economy (Varoufakis, 2024b). For example, the market value of the top seven US tech firms surpasses that of major economies like the UK, France and Japan. Cloud capital remains concentrated in the US and China, leaving others behind (Varoufakis, 2024b). The US and China's dominance raise questions about the global economic order and the positioning of the Global South, which faces pressure to align with one side in the rapidly evolving digital economy. Cloud capital also intersects with high-tech sectors like aerospace, biotechnology and clean energy (Schindler et al., 2023). In this context, the US and China aim to shape digital and technological networks to project geopolitical and economic power by setting rules, controlling key technologies and building their digital infrastructure.

As China has moved from being a technology follower to a significant competitor to the US, the latter has imposed stringent restrictions on Chinese access to critical technologies, framing leadership in these sectors as a 'national security imperative' (Sullivan, 2022; Takach, 2024). This rivalry has heightened trade conflicts and geopolitical tensions as access to critical raw materials becomes increasingly crucial. Although China dominates the supply of these materials, even in mineral-rich regions of the Global South (Canuto, 2023), the benefits of the China–Africa relationship remain limited, as evidenced by ongoing challenges in Congo's cobalt supply chain (Sikhakhane, 2024). Sikhakhane (2024) notes that the issue is not solely due to external actors like China but also Africa's lack of 'collective muscle' to safeguard its interests in this global competition. This critique underscores how external powers, including China, strategically pursue their national interests, leaving the Global South and most BRICS members marginalised and reduced to suppliers of critical raw minerals.

Transformation of Economic Structures and De-dollarisation Debate

Concerns about the dominance of the US dollar, mainly its role in transferring wealth from the periphery to the core, have gained renewed attention since the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia in 2022 (Li, 2023). These sanctions reignited the de-dollarisation debate as countries began exploring alternatives to reduce their dependency on the US-led global financial system. China's ascendance, with alternatives like WeChat and digital currencies, challenges the dollar's supremacy. Its financial platforms, such as the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System and UnionPay, now rival Western options like SWIFT by integrating cloud capital with financial services (Varoufakis, 2024a; *The Economist*, 2024). However, despite the growing rhetoric around de-dollarisation, Li (2023) argues that little evidence suggests that the dollar's global dominance is seriously at risk. While many believe BRICS will create an alternative, Nogueira Batista Jr (2024) contends such hopes are overly optimistic, as the US fiercely protects the dollar's 'exorbitant privilege'. Donald Trump's threats to impose tariffs on countries abandoning the dollar further reflect this stance (Norton, 2024). Interestingly, Putin, while unveiling a symbolic BRICS currency, stated that BRICS would not actively oppose the dollar but would pursue alternatives if necessary (Siddiqui, 2024).

China's economic power and technological advancements threaten the US monopoly on the global payment system and shape the geopolitical rivalry with Washington (Gattolin & Véron, 2024; Varoufakis, 2024a). This competition, including US restrictions on critical technologies like microchips, contributes to a 'new Cold War' focused on technology and capital (Varoufakis, 2024a; Schindler et al., 2023). Within BRICS, China, India, Iran and Russia have established national payment networks, 'a world once dominated by Western ones' (*The Economist*, 2024). Efforts to link these systems and create a BRICS intra-bank settlement system are ongoing, though South Africa remains cautious (Toussaint, 2024). Coordinating the interests of BRICS countries poses a significant challenge to forming a united front against dollar supremacy (Nogueira Batista Jr, 2024). While the rationale for de-dollarisation is sound, particularly for allowing peripheral economies to gain financial sovereignty, there are concerns that its benefits may not be evenly distributed across the Global South.

Fadhel Kaboub argues that complicating this debate is the fact that many countries in the Global South, particularly in Africa, still have unfinished business concerning the decolonisation of their economic structures (Modern Money Lab, 2024). Historically positioned as raw material suppliers and consumer markets during colonial rule, these countries continue to grapple with the consequences of these roles, which impede their economic development and maintain their subordinate position in the global value chain. The burden of external debt, denominated in foreign currencies, further constrains fiscal policy and forces prioritisation of repayments over essential development areas like health and education. With China playing a leading role, this de-dollarisation is unimaginable for African countries in a system that continues to be structurally and economically colonised. While the Belt and Road Initiative offer infrastructure development opportunities, it raises concerns about debt sustainability and long-term dependence on China (Carmody, Taylor & Zajontz, 2021).

In a global digitalised economic order, the benefits of de-dollarisation could also be unevenly shared due to various factors, including the countries' differing economic strengths, governance structures and resource endowments. Kharel (2020, p. 2) notes that developing countries were 'one of the Cold War's chief victims', raising concerns about a potential recurrence. The precarious positioning of some BRICS countries calls into question the alliance's efficacy and autonomy. As technology shifts to digital assets, these states supply raw materials while remaining consumers in a system led by powerful economies. In this regard, Africa is the largest consumer of Chinese goods and loans, resulting in a persistent trade deficit with China (Chen, Fornino & Rawlings, 2024). This issue is exacerbated by the suspected dumping of electric vehicles due to overcapacity, which prompted the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, to seek a more balanced trade arrangement (Mpembe, 2024).

Coalition-forming by BRICS in Multilateral Bodies

While the status of BRICS as a leader of the Global South remains uncertain, a key challenge lies in whether it serves all its members or primarily benefits its dominant ones, particularly China and Russia. These two countries leverage their alignment to promote mutual global interests, but BRICS as a bloc exhibits minimal involvement in UN institutions (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020; Jetschke & Abb, 2019). The group's 'internal asymmetries' hinder cohesive action among its countries (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020, p. 46), contrasting sharply with the unified image projected during regular summits. This disconnect between appearance and reality underscores the profound challenges BRICS faces in functioning as a unified force on the global stage.

Reform Agenda of the UN and Its Bodies

The democratisation of the ILO and UN reform have long been central agenda items. A key question for scholars is whether emerging powers like those in BRICS can form a united front or if they hold diverging positions on these issues (Jetschke & Abb, 2019). Given Russia and China's permanent seats on the UNSC and their non-elective roles on the ILO Governing Body (representing countries of chief industrial importance), it is evident that BRICS countries occupy very different institutional positions within these structures. Unlike the UNGA, the UNSC and the ILO Governing Body function as non-plenary entities within the UN framework, excluding many member states. Consequently, the composition of these bodies has been contentious since the UN's inception (Talmon, 2009).

Many developing countries have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with these arrangements, yet their concerns have largely gone unaddressed. Therefore, it is understandable that these nations consistently voice the necessity to modify the distribution of seats allocated to each group, reflecting the proportional increase of these entities (Talmon, 2009). Within BRICS, the advantageous positions held by Russia and China in the UNSC suggest that the group's internal dynamics can be

expected to mirror some of the cleavages that have divided the international community on these issues (Jetschke & Abb, 2019, p. 168). In this context, established powers are concerned about the potential dilution of their privileged status and the challenge to their veto rights (Nichols, 2024), fearing that expanding veto power could render the UNSC more dysfunctional. BRICS members are divided on this issue, as seen in their mixed support for the Pact for the Future, with India and Russia expressing reservations (Singh, 2024; Deutsche Welle, 2024).

Internal Asymmetries, Institutional Constraints and Divergencies in the UN and ILO

BRICS countries face significant challenges within the UN due to disparities in historical participation, diplomatic representation, financial contributions, and operational capacities (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020). China and Russia, as permanent UNSC members, wield significant influence, while others rotate in and out with smaller diplomatic delegations. South Africa's reduction in diplomatic personnel further limits its impact (Makinana, 2021). These imbalances result in uneven influence over UN decision-making and institutional operations. Financial contributions also dictate influence within global institutions (Zhang & Jing, 2024). Thus, financial asymmetry mirrors the broader trend where economic leverage translates into negotiating power, as seen in South Africa's backing of UNSC Resolution 1973 on Libya while other BRICS members abstained (Nuruzzaman, 2022). Such internal divisions, combined with the entrenched dominance of permanent UNSC members through the 'penholder' system, hinder BRICS' ability to influence peace and security discussions (Muvumba Sellström, 2023).

Despite advocating for UNSC reform, BRICS struggles to form a cohesive strategy due to internal divisions and enduring structural imbalances in the UN system (Jetschke & Abb, 2019). Brazil, India, and South Africa lead efforts to secure permanent seats, a goal endorsed at the 2023 BRICS Summit (Kiku, 2024; South Africa, 2023), but their ambitions clash with P5 dominance and US proposals for African seats without veto rights (Nichols, 2024). While the Ezulwini Consensus demands at least two permanent seats for Africa with full veto powers (African Union, 2005, p. 9), competing reform proposals risk reinforcing inequalities rather than addressing them (Hooghe et al., 2017).

Although BRICS members initially united as emerging powers, their divergent approaches to UN engagement undermine their ability to act as a cohesive bloc. India's argument that Asia's diversity cannot be represented by just one or two UNSC members (Talmon, 2009) reflects broader tensions within BRICS regarding equitable representation. While BRICS foreign ministers have reaffirmed cooperation, their joint statements lack concrete policy coordination, weakening their collective negotiating power (Itamaraty, 2023). Ultimately, entrenched institutional privileges within the UNSC, coupled with BRICS' fragmented reform strategies, limit its ability to meaningfully shift global governance dynamics (Albuquerque & Bras Martins da Costa, 2020).

Similar imbalances affect BRICS' engagement with the ILO, where Brazil, Russia, India and China hold non-elective Governing Body seats alongside major Western powers (ILO, 2024). These structural constraints limit their ability to advocate for developing countries. The delayed ratification of the 1986 ILO Constitution amendment by key BRICS members, particularly Russia and China, reflects an ongoing disregard for equitable governance reforms. Divergent domestic labour policies further hinder BRICS' unity within the ILO. China, India and Russia opposed referring the right to strike to the International Court of Justice, while Brazil and South Africa supported it (Chade & Mottaz, 2023; Jefford, 2022). Such divisions and geopolitical tensions further complicate BRICS' ability to act as a cohesive bloc in global labour governance. This is evident in the BRICS' response to the 2022 Ukraine conflict, where China and Russia opposed an ILO resolution condemning Russia, while other BRICS members abstained (ILO, 2022).

It is worth noting that while China's dominance within BRICS is primarily economic, Russia asserts its geopolitical influence through its UNSC veto and energy exports. As a major energy supplier, Russia deepens economic dependencies within the bloc, mainly through Rosneft's expanding oil agreements with India and China's significant reliance on Russian gas (Verma, 2024). This energy leverage strengthens Moscow's bilateral ties and reinforces its broader strategic position within BRICS. Furthermore, Russia's strategic alignment with China, notably demonstrated by their coordinated vetoes of UN resolutions concerning Myanmar, Syria and Venezuela (Gon, 2025), underscores a symbiotic partnership that significantly amplifies their collective global influence. However, the strategic alignment between Russia and China, facilitated by their diplomatic manoeuvring and economic leverage, frequently subordinates the priorities of smaller BRICS members to their interests. This dynamic effectively allows Russia to consolidate its influence through its partnership with China, shaping the BRICS' geopolitical direction to reflect their shared agenda.

Is BRICS Expanding to Russia, China or the South?

The potential of BRICS to challenge the current economic order largely depends on China's leadership (Kamin & Langhammer, 2023). Despite advancements in cloud capital and payment systems, China's internal limitations and reliance on existing global structures curb its influence. Its currency is not widely recognised as an international store of value or medium of exchange, and its financial market remains underdeveloped compared to the US. Meanwhile, the NDB aims to complement rather than replace existing multilateral economic bodies (Singhal, 2015) and has maintained a less antagonistic stance towards Bretton Woods institutions, as shown by its compliance with Western sanctions on Russia (Bond, 2019; Stuenkel, 2020; Toussaint, 2024). While the bank provides loans in local currencies without imposing conditions (Ramos, 2024), it is criticised for stabilising rather than transforming the global financial order (Bond, 2019).

Politically, BRICS members do not appear intent on directly confronting the West. South Africa avoids antagonising major powers (Cele, 2023), while India participates in US-led alliances like QUAD and I2U2, reflecting its multi-alignment strategy (Upadhyay, 2022). China and Russia, however, leverage BRICS to strengthen ties with developing countries disillusioned with former colonisers and US dominance. Dixon and Shepherd (2023) note that Russia's anti-Western ambitions for BRICS diverge from the bloc's aversion to direct conflict with the West. While many in the Global South see BRICS as an economic opportunity, Beijing and Moscow view it as a tool to counter Western influence, which may not align with broader development goals. The group's push for global governance reforms reflects China and Russia's political interests rather than a unified agenda for the Global South. Aspirants to BRICS seek alternatives to Western financial institutions, but diverging priorities among members could limit the bloc's capacity for meaningful systemic change (Singhal, 2015).

Conclusion

BRICS primarily serves Chinese economic hegemony and Russian geopolitical interests, replicating the power imbalances it claims to oppose. While positioning itself as a Global South champion, the bloc's internal hierarchies, evident in UNSC reform inertia and ILO fragmentation and resource extraction practices, marginalise smaller members and perpetuate dependency. The bloc's economic model, described as 'Neoliberalism with Southern Characteristics' (Prashad, 2013, p. 2), prioritises commodity-driven growth and low wages, reinforcing global extractive capitalism rather than fostering sustainable development. Despite institutions like the NDB, BRICS lacks a coherent ideological alternative to neoliberalism, limiting its ability to disrupt the existing economic order.

While BRICS advocates for a multipolar world, internal asymmetries, particularly the dominance of China and Russia's interests, hinder genuine Global South cooperation. To overcome these challenges,

Global South nations must balance engagement with BRICS and pursue alternative partnerships to enhance economic diversification and political autonomy. Structural reforms, including financial transparency, equitable representation, and internal democratic governance, are crucial for BRICS to become a credible counterweight to Western hegemony. Without such reforms, BRICS risks serving the ambitions of its most influential members rather than the broader Global South.

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