

Motivations and Implications of BRICS Expansion in the Context of the Global South

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ABSTRACT

With the ongoing evolution of the global political and economic framework, the collective rise of the Global South has become increasingly evident. As the most representative multilateral cooperation organization of the Global South, the BRICS countries have undergone a historic expansion process over the past two years. The underlying drivers behind this expansion are threefold: firstly, it aligns with the calls from Global South nations to move away from Western-centric dominance and oppose the international order dominated by Western hegemony; secondly, it capitalizes on the shifting center of the global economy, enabling these nations to pursue economic development and cooperation, with the aim of rapidly boosting their economic strength; and thirdly, it underscores the shared historical identity and cooperative values between Global South and BRICS, thereby enhancing the collective voice and international status of the Global South. Moreover, the expansion of BRICS member states not only increases geopolitical influence and drives the reshaping of the international order but also further expands the economic cooperation space of BRICS member states, promotes rapid national economic growth, and reinforces the identity of the Global South, which helps it achieve more equitable and just global governance and cooperation.

KEYWORDS

Global South; BRICS; Expansion

1 Formulation of the research question

The issues about Global South have been widely discussed in numerous important conferences both at home and abroad. Existing studies have argued that the Global South refers to a group of countries with diverse values, cultural traditions, levels of development and interests, whose individual scope transcends geographic boundaries and economic categories, and whose important qualities are non-Western, anti-interventionist and development-oriented. Thus, the Global South is regarded as a major driving force in the restructuring of the international order and the game strategic of the world, whose development and rise have become an important symbol of the profound evolution of the unprecedented changes of the past century.

It is acknowledged that the BRICS expansion process has gone through five levels. In 2011, South Africa joined the BRICs(Brazil, Russia, India and China, abbreviated as BRICs), marking the first expansion of this organization. Therefore, its mechanism was formally expanded to a new one —BRICS(Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). And then in 2017, Chinese leaders proposed the concept of BRICS+ at the conference of BRICS Leaders in Xiamen. Chinese government called for more emerging market and developing countries to be invited to join the BRICS cooperation with the hope of achieving common prosperity. When China assumed the presidency of the BRICS during 2022, it once again called for opening the door to gather new forces and attract new members to pursue development and cooperation. Hence the BRICS countries agreed to initiate the expansion process starting with the BRICS Year of China. On August 24, 2023, a special press conference at the 15th BRICS Summit announced that the invitation to join the BRICS was extended to five countries - Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, the UAE, Iran, Egypt, and Argentina. And on January 1, 2024, the five countries — Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and the UAE formally became the member of the BRICS. This historic expansion also marks a new departure for BRICS cooperation and demonstrates the attractiveness and appeal of BRICS to emerging market countries and developing countries. By October 2024, BRICS leaders endorsed the BRICS Partner Country Model Document at the Kazan Summit. They extending partner country invitations to 13 developing countries interested in participating in BRICS cooperation. Following that, BRICS brought in new partner countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Bolivia and Kazakhstan in January 2025, thereby embarking on a new era of greater BRICS cooperation.

So why do the BRICS engage in a major expansion? The author would like to focus on the perspective of the Global South to discuss the primary motivations for the expansion of BRICS and its implications. The author would also like to reveal the historical significance and practical demands of BRICS expansion in the background of the Global South through the study. Moreover, this study can not only enrich the content of academic research on the Global South and the BRICS countries, but also, it would provide valuable practical references for the cooperation among the countries of the South and the reform of global governance.

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2 Motivations for BRICS expansion in the context of the global south

The expansion of the BRICS further embodies the interests of an increasing number of Southern countries, which enhances their voice in handling international affairs, and promotes the development for a more equitable and diversified international order. The emergence of the Global South is a reflection that the power of emerging market economies and developing countries has been rising. They are opposed to world hegemonic politics and power. Their demand for autonomous independence and a multipolar political development are becoming increasingly prominent. Thus, only by uniting their strength and speaking with one voice can they achieve a more just and reasonable right to survival right and discourse power, which can resist the hegemony of Western capitalist countries led by the United States. Thereby these Global South countries can avoid becoming the “sacrificial lambs” in the game of world great powers. As is known to all, the BRICS initiatives have a solid platform for Global South countries, which includes building a world with multipolarity, improving the international status of emerging economies, and coping with the profound challenges in global geopolitics. Consequently, these countries will maintain their interests and speak with one voice, thereby achieving a higher level of strategic autonomy.

The Global South countries have the similar colonial domination histories to the BRICS. Their foreign policies and cultural values have been shaped by their oppressed, trampled, and exploited experiences after independence. The Global South upholds sovereignty, advocates against hegemonic rules, and emphasizes equal international status, making it easier for them to reach consensus within the BRICS cooperation mechanism. By the end of the 15th century, Western countries had begun to exploit and dominate many regions through trade and military force. Then many emerging market economies and developing countries have been reduced to colonies in history, remaining on the periphery of the Western-dominated international systemic order over the long term. Unequal treaties, brutal military conquests, and forced labor have plunged the peoples of these colonized nations into dire straits, severely damaging their economic structures and political development. At this time, anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist ideologies started to spread in colonial countries, which inspired colonial peoples to rise up and took up arms to defend their national and ethnic sovereignty and dignity. Meanwhile, Jawaharlal Nehru's advocacy of the “Non-Aligned Movement,” Kwame Nkrumah's theoretical contributions in the field of “neo-colonialism,” “Three Worlds” theory, and Ali Mazrui's academic interpretation of Africa's “triple heritage” began to drive ideological transformations in these marginalized nations, uniting them in collective resistance against Western domination. And after World War II, increasing numbers of people in Asian, African, and Latin American countries joined the fight for national liberation and independence, and strived to break the “shackles” of Western colonialism. Nevertheless, the historical legacy left by colonial rulers, such as long-term economic dependence, political corruption, and division, continues to challenge and hinder the development of these developing countries. Western powers often interfere in the regional affairs of Asia, Africa, and Latin America through political regime changes, manipulation, economic sanctions, and military intervention, which undermines the ability of these nations to pursue independent development. As a result, the vast majority of Asian, African, and Latin American countries, as members of the “Global South” group, have undergone profound reflection on the history and reality. So it has inspired them to break away from the existing international system dominated by the US and the West, pursue the democratization of international relations, and build a multipolar, equal, fair, and inclusive international order.

The BRICS has emphasized the importance of promoting the multipolar restructuring of the world order on numerous important public occasions. It has clearly stated the opposition to neo-colonialist policies and hegemony and called for the participation of more emerging market economies and developing countries, so as to enhance the cohesion and influence of the Global South. In multiple declarations, the BRICS has affirmed their commitment to upholding multilateralism, adhering to the purposes and principles of international law, while respecting the status of the United Nations Charter and its central role within the international system. Therefore, at the 15th BRICS Summit, the BRICS countries reached a consensus on the guiding principles, criteria, and procedures for expansion, ushering in a historic major expansion. According to Kazan Declaration in 2024, the BRICS noted the keen interest shown by the Global South in the BRICS and expressed support for the Modalities of BRICS Partner Country Category. It is believed that expanding partnerships between BRICS and emerging market developing countries will further strengthen solidarity and genuine international cooperation and benefit all humanity. Moreover, they commit to further advancing the institutional development of the BRICS mechanism.

In this regard, the BRICS countries have always attached great importance to the role of emerging market economies and developing countries in international affairs. In the Second Johannesburg Declaration, the BRICS countries advocated for the increased representation of emerging market economies and developing countries in international organizations and multilateral forums where they play an important role. At the same time, the BRICS countries also support comprehensive reform of the United Nations, including reform of its Security Council, with the aim of making it more democratic, representative, and effective, and increasing the proportion of developing countries among Security Council members so that it can adequately address the current global challenges. They also support the legitimate demands of emerging and developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, including Brazil, India, and South Africa, so that

they can assume a greater role in international affairs, particularly within the United Nations (including the Security Council). At the 16th BRICS Summit, the urgent needs for equitable and inclusive geographical representation of staff members of the United Nations Secretariat and other international organizations were further emphasized.

The Global South has become an undeniable power in the changing global political map. Under the cooperation and leadership of the BRICS mechanism, emerging market economies and developing countries represented by the BRICS nations will continue to drive the process of de-Westernization. While Western hegemony has not yet come to an end, the expansion of the BRICS nations will mark a crucial step toward a multipolar world.

3 The implications of BRICS expansion in the context of the global south

The big expansion of the BRICS countries has markedly boosted their economic cooperation potential. On the one hand, the resource endowments and market sizes of BRICS countries have further enlarged, while their industrial complementarity has been continuously strengthened. First, the inclusion of new BRICS members such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran—Middle Eastern countries—has brought the BRICS countries' oil production to nearly half of the global total, thereby substantially elevating their status in the global energy landscape. Second, the BRICS countries also hold a vital position in major global crops. This is because the member states and partner countries of the BRICS nations are almost all major producers of key commodities globally, including grains, meat, crude oil, natural gas, and strategic minerals such as iron ore, copper, and nickel. According to relevant data, Brazil, India, and China together account for approximately 60% of global sugarcane production; China and Brazil's combined corn (corn kernel) production makes up about 30% of global corn production; China and India's rice production accounts for over 50% of global rice production; China, India, and Russia contribute over 40% of the world's total wheat production; Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (all new BRICS partner countries) generate nearly 90% of the world's total palm oil fruit production; and China and India produce approximately 40% of the world's total potato production. In terms of mineral resources, the expanded BRICS countries account for 72% of the world's rare earth reserves, 75% of manganese resources, and half of the world's graphite reserves. Different countries in BRICS have unique advantages in areas such as energy, agriculture, and minerals. The BRICS countries can draw on more abundant resources, which to a certain extent enhances the complementary advantages of different industries among BRICS countries.

On the other hand, the expansion of the BRICS countries has further stimulated the interactive vitality of their financial and payment infrastructure, providing critical support for the economic development and financial stability of “Global South” countries. In contrast to the NDB's provision of low-cost loans to BRICS countries to assist member states in infrastructure development in areas such as energy and transportation, the NDB also continues to allocate more local currency loans and project investments through BRICS expansion, promoting the interconnected development of sustainable financial markets among BRICS member states. It is worth noting that BRICS has been actively exploring and advocating the establishment of a unified local currency payment and settlement system. BRICS leaders at the summit also encouraged member countries to keep deepening cooperation on local currency settlement for trade, authorizing relevant finance departments and monetary authorities to advance research on local currency payment tools and platforms. Simultaneously, BRICS is advancing the BRICS Payment Project (BRICS Pay) and the Multilateral Central Bank Digital Currency Bridge Project (mBridge), striving to establish a multilateral cooperation mechanism for cross-border transactions to reduce reliance on Western currencies. Through expansion, BRICS can absorb new member contributions to further expand their foreign exchange reserves, mitigate exchange rate volatility and foreign exchange costs, and thereby better withstand the impact of financial risks on national development.

Along with the expansion of BRICS, the economic power of its members has also been growing. Based on data from the past decade, the total GDP of BRICS countries has been going up every year (as shown in Figure 1 below). In 2018, BRICS countries even made up more of the world's total GDP than the G7, which is mostly made up of Western countries. Some scholars think that by 2025, BRICS countries will make up half of the world's GDP. Moreover, the higher the level of interaction between countries in the East and South, the more beneficial it will be for global stability.

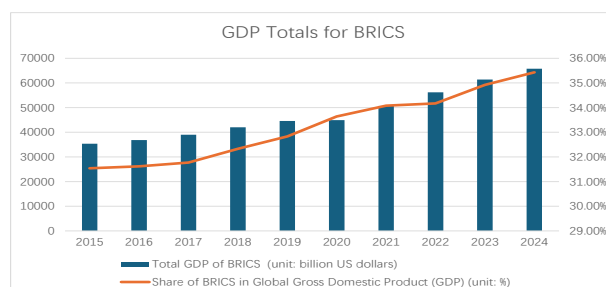


Figure 1 GDP totals for BRICS

Not only that, under the influence of the BRICS countries, the economies of the regions where the BRICS countries are situated have also grown. Driven by the recovery of the region's largest economies, such as Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa, Africa's economic growth rate is expected to increase from 3.4% in 2024 to 3.7% in 2025 and 4.0% in 2026. The near-term outlook for South Asia is expected to remain strong, driven by India's robust performance and the recovery of several other economies, with growth rates of 5.7% and 6.0% projected for 2025 and 2026, respectively. Spurred by improved prospects for Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two largest economies in the Middle East, the region's economic growth rate is expected to rise from 2.0% in 2024 to 3.5% in 2025. The economic outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean is quite optimistic. Supported by increased private consumption, loose monetary policy, and strong export growth, the region is expected to see growth rise from 1.9% in 2024 to 2.5% in 2025.

4 Conclusion

The expansion of the BRICS is not only the result of the coordinated evolution of the global economic landscape and geopolitical situation, but also reflects the strategic choices made by the countries of the "Global South" in their efforts to secure their own survival and development and obtain a greater voice in international affairs. Under the BRICS mechanism, the Global South can participate more broadly and deeply in international cooperation and global governance reform processes, enhance its collective international voice, promote the formation of a multipolar world order, and build a more equal, fair, and reasonable world order. The expansion of the BRICS will also face more difficult challenges in the future. For example, as the number of BRICS members keeps growing, the political, economic, and cultural diversity and differences among member countries are becoming more and more distinct. Their willingness to cooperate and level of participation on different issues is uneven, and the costs of coordination and decision-making are also rising sharply. Not merely that, the western countries led by the United States view it as a challenge to the existing international order, while the Global South regards BRICS cooperation as an alternative to the "Western path," undermining the western influence over emerging markets and developing countries. Western countries have sought to discredit BRICS cooperation through media smear campaigns, economic decoupling, technological sanctions, and strategic division, aiming to undermine the cohesion and influence of BRICS nations so as to maintain their own dominant position on the international stage. Because of this, the BRICS countries still need to keep working on their systems, improve how they communicate and coordinate their foreign policies, deepen economic cooperation and complementarity among their own members, and clarify and strengthen their shared development goals. They also need to work together to push for reforms to the global governance system, pursue a more fair and inclusive international order, and achieve high-quality development.

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