

Policy Brief

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Uncharted Waters: The BRICS Expansion and Implications

At the 15th BRICS summit in August 2023, the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) announced plans to expand their membership by inviting six nations to join as official members. This move means that when Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, join the bloc with full membership in January 2024, BRICS will represent about **46.5% of the global population and about a third of the global GDP**. The expansion will likely aid BRICS' legitimacy as a representative and inclusive institution. However, it also makes an organisation that has already been **criticised** for being a varied, miscellaneous collection of member-states, even more heterogeneous, adding new regional dynamics, political governance structures, development stages, and economic specialisations to the mix. The expansion thus has considerable implications for the governance, efficacy, and character of BRICS as an international institution.

Meanwhile, scholars and analysts have situated the existence of BRICS in the context of a global political power contest between Russia, China, and the US. This struggle takes place within a Western-led world order that many developing countries also perceive as institutionally excluding the voices and interests of the global South, particularly in the sphere of economic development. The expansion of BRICS, and the subsequent effects it has on the organisation's competence, is, therefore, a significant development in international politics, even if it is not the watershed for a multipolar world order that some have been hoping for. This paper aims to track the international context behind the BRICS challenge to Western organisations, discuss the potential geopolitical consequences of a BRICS expansion in the context of a Russian power play, and consider the implications for Serbia's global positioning.

BRICS' Geopolitical Significance as a New Dilemma

BRICS has emerged as a significant geopolitical power bloc that has symbolically challenged the primacy of the Western-led international system established in the aftermath of the Cold War. Since its inception in 2009, BRICS has consistently called for reforms to aid the greater inclusivity and representation of developing countries in international institutions. They have also emphasised the importance of non-Western avenues of economic investment in the global South and developing countries, and campaigned for creating a **"more democratic and just multi-polar world order"**. Implicitly—and often explicitly—this agenda challenges the Western-led normative and economic order. Multipolarity, by definition, challenges US hegemony; direct South-South trade linkages aim to **bypass the dollar** and Western-led financial institutions; politicians from BRICS countries are often quoted as criticising Western **policies** and **institutions**.¹ The possibility of BRICS' expanding influence is thus a notable development in the normative fabric of international relations, in that it poses a challenge—even if a small one—to the legitimacy and necessity of Western-led international institutions.

¹ In this context, Western institutions refers broadly to international institutions created and dominated by advanced Western nations. For the purposes of this policy brief, this designation encompasses entities such as the IMF, World Bank, and UN Security Council, as well as norms and practices like the prominence of the US dollar and tariff policies, all of which developing countries often perceive as aligned with Western interests (and potentially at odds with their own). However, it should be emphasized that defining which institutions fall under this category is often a topic of debate and depends on context and international subjectivity.



BRICS initiatives have revolved around fostering economic, political, and security cooperation and South-South linkages with the goal of creating a multipolar world order. These have varied in their success levels and scope of impact. Diplomatic and strategic activities have [expanded](#) beyond annual summits into a variety of multilateral agreements, councils, forums, action plans, policy documents, and more, offering new avenues for negotiation and geopolitical activity. Meanwhile, the most-lauded BRICS success project has been the [New Development Bank](#) (NDB), established at the 2014 Brazil Summit with the goal of supporting the [economic development of BRICS nations](#). According to its [website](#), the NDB has approved 96 development projects totalling \$32.8 billion since its inception, which is not an insignificant number. However, in perspective, the World Bank Group commitments totalled [\\$115 billion](#) in just 2022, leading [some](#) to argue that the NDB is not an impressive alternative. Another notable project is the [BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement \(CRA\)](#), also established at the 2014 Brazil Summit, which reserves \$100 billion for emergency lending during liquidity crises. According to the Indian Government's [press release](#), the CRA would serve to "provide an alternative approach" to the IMF due to the absence of governance reforms that would give India more of a voice in decision-making. These initiatives display an organised effort to establish alternatives to existing global financial architecture, guided by existing dissatisfaction.

While certain BRICS initiatives have made progress, others have stagnated or are unlikely to have tangible impact within the next few years. One of the most consistent policy pillars of BRICS since its foundation has been calling for the reform of international institutions, including the UNSC, IMF, and the World Bank, but major reforms have not occurred. The [BRICS Cable](#), introduced at the 2012 BRICS summit in New Delhi, was meant to connect BRICS nations through a submarine cable network, bypassing the high cost of communication via hubs in Europe and the US. However, there has been [little progress](#) or reference made to the project since it was first mentioned. Regarding financial and monetary policy, the prospect of a common currency seems [unlikely](#) due to logistical barriers and a lack of political will. Similarly, though China and [Russia](#) have led a considerable amount of discussion in BRICS channels surrounding [de-dollarisation](#) in international finance, efforts have been limited to bilateral negotiations with no comprehensive BRICS-led [replacement](#) of the SWIFT system in sight. The expansion of BRICS has not made either of these prospects more likely, as the currency of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is [pegged to the US dollar](#). While it would be excessive to characterize BRICS' initiatives as irrelevant, their projects are limited in their current ability to bring about large-scale global change.

Accordingly, an examination of BRICS' overarching role suggests that its primary geopolitical importance is not necessarily in overhauling the global power structure. Many BRICS policies and programmes seem to be a reaction to discontent with representation in Western institutions rather than a cohesive, systematic strategy for collectively uplifting the global South and developing nations. In turn, BRICS has been commonly criticised for [lacking a common vision](#), which has been attributed to vast differences among its five member states. Critics of BRICS' cohesion capacities point to the ongoing border conflict between [India and China](#) and domestic political issues that often take precedence over international agendas. Meanwhile, differences in national [political structure](#) (China and Russia are authoritarian regimes; Brazil, South Africa, and India have democratic constitutions) and economic industries are another point of criticism.

Further, though BRICS often challenges Western hegemony in its discourse and practice, India is a large American ally that [benefits significantly](#) from American investment, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE depend on the US for [security reasons](#). Despite a [jumbled foreign policy response](#) in the wake of the War in Ukraine, at the 2023 BRICS summit, even South Africa was reluctant to identify itself with either world power and instead referred to themselves, and their activities in BRICS, as "[non-aligned](#)". Internal dynamics and complex allegiances contribute to the assessment that it is unlikely for BRICS to shape-shift into a unified political force that will entirely unseat established international organisations. This will likely only be exacerbated by the addition of six new countries to its consensus-based decision-making structure. However, BRICS' alternative institutions remain geopolitically significant through their symbolic challenge to Western-dominated organisations, and dissatisfaction with the current world order and institutions.

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The Expansion of BRICS in Light of the War in Ukraine

The expansion of BRICS is an important geopolitical development for Russia, who stands to benefit from greater economic and strategic involvement with the global South and non-Western international organisations. In the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion into Ukraine, Russia has been hit by a levy of sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the West. Russian banks have been [banned from the SWIFT system](#), Western leaders struck Russia's Central Bank with restrictions that effectively [severed the Kremlin's access](#) to a substantial emergency reserve of \$630 billion, and many multinational corporations have independently [stopped doing business](#) in Russia. By March 2022, French Finance Minister, Bruno Le Maire, emphasised that the Western-led sanctions had frozen almost [\\$1 trillion of Russian assets](#) in total. Though Western media and Russian state-media often tell a different story about the current health of the Russian economy, it is safe to say that sanctions have had an effect on the Russian economy, at least in terms of necessitating the expansion of efforts to invest in new markets, suppliers, and trade partners.

In this regard, the BRICS nations, and developing countries that have not adopted Western sanctions, have presented a valuable economic prospect for Russia. In March 2023, Russia's [foreign policy](#) concept emphasised building stronger relationships with China and India, as well as increasing trade and investment with countries in Africa and Latin America. Indeed, China and India have both [abstained](#) from condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They have also both [dramatically increased their imports of Russian oil](#) at prices [above \\$60 per barrel](#) (the Western-imposed price cap). In August, Russia also became [Brazil's top supplier of oil](#), replacing the United States. Heightened Russian involvement with BRICS nations, developing countries, and new markets, has given the Kremlin new opportunities to weather the storm of Western sanctions and reduce the economic impact that Western-imposed isolation has had.

An expanded BRICS, bolstered by greater international attention and influence, might also provide Russia with a platform on the global stage to challenge prevailing norms and narratives on their isolation and the war. The Kremlin is well known for utilising [propaganda tactics](#) both domestically and abroad in attempts to shift public opinion, perception, and discourse. At the 2023 BRICS summit, Putin repeatedly accused the West as being responsible for the war in Ukraine, [quoted](#) with saying that Russia's actions were meant "to end the war that was unleashed by the West and its satellites". In a situation somewhat symbolic of the complex geopolitical workings within BRICS, this message was delivered via video as Putin was not allowed to physically attend the summit due to an ICC warrant out for his arrest. In the same [video message](#), Putin also emphasized greater cooperation with BRICS in the context of the recent collapse of the Black Sea Grain Deal, which he claimed was "deliberately obstructed" and "hypocritically blamed" on Russia by the West. In this sense, the BRICS summits serve as a prominent multilateral platform for Russia to convey its anti-Western talking points to fellow BRICS nations, while attempting to frame its [policies](#) as aligned with the interests of developing countries. It is also notable that Russia is slated to assume the BRICS chairmanship in 2024 at the request of Brazil, which may only further facilitate Russia's interests within BRICS. Russia's gambit is especially dangerous for the West here, because it attempts to discursively align a legitimate desire of many countries to foster a more just and representative world order with the foreign policy platform of an authoritarian state that has disregarded international law, institutions, and sovereignty.

Russia is ascribing an increasingly important role to BRICS as a counterweight to the Western organisations that it has been excluded from. However, it is not likely that BRICS is the vehicle through which Russia can perceive its foreign policy goals. Of the six incoming BRICS member nations, four—Argentina, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—voted [in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution](#) condemning the Russian invasion. Many of the BRICS member states may not necessarily be entirely committed to the principles of Western foreign policy, but nevertheless have a continued interest in maintaining friendly relations with the US and Europe. In March 2022, BRICS own bank, the NDB, put operations in Russia [on hold](#), as did China's [Asian Infrastructure Bank \(AIIB\)](#). The 2023 BRICS summit also saw [fewer African leaders](#) as attendees, and leaders across the African continent denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It remains ultimately unlikely that the Kremlin can make up for its exclusion from Western international organisations through BRICS alone.

Still, Russia's involvement in BRICS illustrates its attempt to pursue foreign policy options beyond being relegated to the status of international pariah. For Russia, BRICS is a potential platform to assert its relevance in a multipolar world order. The Western world now faces a complex task in its bid to counterbalance Russian influence in the global South. It is a complex balancing-game of public relations, in which the West must remain proactive in countering propaganda and Russia's developing geopolitical connections, while also avoiding the perception of unilateral strong-arming.

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On Potential Implications for Serbia's Global Positioning

Serbia is currently at a complex geopolitical juncture, situated between multiple spheres of global power and influence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further complicated the Serbian-EU relationship, as Serbia has had historically close political, economic, and cultural ties to Russia—ties that they still have [not fully severed](#), much to the chagrin of the EU. Although Serbian President Aleksander Vučić has [condemned](#) the Russian invasion, he has also [refused](#) to enforce sanctions on Russia — making Serbia the [only European state other than Belarus](#) to not implement Western sanctions. Meanwhile, the Serbian public remains [sympathetic](#) to Putin and Russia, in part due to the promotion of [pro-Russian sentiments](#) by Serbian leadership, through government-controlled media (which constitutes a significant portion of the country's media-landscape). In the wake of these developments, it seems that enthusiasm for EU accession has waned, both for key Serbian [politicians](#), and for the Serbian public—who have recorded their [lowest levels](#) of support for joining the EU in two decades. Given the enduring challenges surrounding EU accession, and an ongoing geopolitical courtship with Russia, Serbia is currently navigating a complex foreign policy landscape while manoeuvring between numerous global spheres of influence.

Serbia has also become increasingly close with another BRICS founding member and Western rival: China. In the past decade, China has played an increasingly large role in the region's development—likely due to its ideal [geographical position near the EU](#). According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, by 2021, China's projects in the Balkans totalled at least [33 billion dollars](#) and over 130 projects. In Serbia specifically, China has invested heavily in [infrastructure](#) development and has become one of Serbia's [largest foreign investors](#) in recent years. Further, Beijing has also attempted to grow its soft power in Serbia through an increase in [diplomatic](#) activity (such as the [Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries](#) platform), as well as establishing [cultural centres](#). Heightened Chinese involvement in Serbia underscores a similar conclusion to its relationship with Russia: that Serbia's geopolitical orientation is not necessarily tied to the EU.

In light of ongoing geopolitical friction, there are voices in Serbia advocating for closer ties with BRICS nations, instead of the EU. For instance, on 28 August 2023, the Movement of the Socialists (PS) party in Serbia, presented a parliamentary proposal advocating for Serbia's accession to BRICS. The PS party was founded in 2008 by pro-Russian politician Aleksander Vulin, who has been serving as the director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency since 2022 and is also currently under [US sanctions](#) for his ties to Russia. Moreover, in a recent [proposal](#), deputies criticised the so-called "European" path for Serbia, outlined what they perceived Serbia would benefit from joining BRICS, and called for a public referendum. The proposal also cited a public opinion [survey](#) conducted in June, which found that 43.2% of citizens were in favour of BRICS accession, while 48.3% viewed Russia as Serbia's primary political partner. Another important factor mentioned in the proposal was that BRICS has [no preconditions](#) on the Kosovo issue, which has been a major stumbling block for EU accession and a large reason why the Serbian public is so sympathetic to Russia. The ongoing discussion around a potential Serbian bid for BRICS membership is a reflection of its position in the evolving global landscape.

Despite the deliberation on BRICS membership, it is unlikely that Serbia will sacrifice its EU bid in order to join BRICS as a member state, at least in the foreseeable future. Though President Vučić stressed the importance of establishing beneficial relations with BRICS countries, he has also said that he remained focused on the [European path](#). Meanwhile, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić [emphasised](#) that Serbia could not both join BRICS and remain a realistic candidate for EU accession, instead calling for increased cooperation with BRICS countries. On the BRICS' side, it is not known when or if it will further expand, nor is it a given that Serbia's membership would be approved. Moreover, joining BRICS is not the functional equivalent of joining the EU for Serbia. They are different political entities in terms of focus, depth, and commitment. BRICS is not a fully developed international institution and does not have a comprehensive framework for prospective member integration. It also lacks a common currency, is composed of geographically and culturally disparate member states, and its initiatives have been limited, as outlined in the first section. Given that the EU remains Serbia's [primary trading partner](#), Serbia's contemplation of BRICS membership appears more symbolic than practically significant for its economic and developmental prospects.

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