

## The BRICS+5 Debate: Chaos or Cohesion

**Hugh Tuckfield**

Director, Indo-Pacific Studies Centre, Australia  
[hugh.tuckfield@indo-pacificstudiescenter.org](mailto:hugh.tuckfield@indo-pacificstudiescenter.org)

In 2024, the expanded BRICS became a reality, after China in 2017, proposed the idea of BRICS Plus. The admission of Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Ethiopia into BRICS+5 represents a major change in the balance of power internally for BRICS towards a more authoritarian group, challenging the democratic balance that existed within BRICS, by diluting the influence of democratic members India, Brazil, and South Africa.

The emergence of BRICS+5 has sparked a significant debate regarding its coherence and effectiveness as a global coalition (Beeson and Zeng 2018). The question that occupies the minds of scholars, policymakers and political pundits is what impact BRICS will have on the liberal international order<sup>1</sup>.

On one side, BRICS+5 is seen as presenting an opportunity for member states to assert their influence in global governance (Lissovolik 2023), to challenge the dominance of the liberal international order, and to promote a multipolar world (Hurrell 2019). On the other side of the debate, observers describe the internal dynamics of BRICS+5 as fractious and argue that the expansion of BRICS will lead to chaos and difficulty in establishing a unified agenda (Duggan et al 2022).

In this article I highlight the fundamental change in BRICS+5's character and present a critique of how the expansion of BRICS to BRICS+5 represents a strategic shift toward a more authoritarian-oriented coalition. I focus on China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Putin, leveraging BRICS expansion to promote and protect their individual interests, including promotion of the Beijing Consensus and challenging the liberal international order to gain benefits for themselves, such as avoiding sanctions for human rights violations and other breaches of international norms.

Xi Jinping and Putin both view the liberal international order as a system that constrains their domestic and international actions, particularly regarding human rights and governance standards. By attempting to reshape the international order, Xi Jinping and Putin aim to create a more favorable international environment that allows them greater freedom to pursue their interests freely, without facing punitive measures. In contrast to democracies, authoritarian leaders typically prioritise the interests of the state above those of the individual, where the state's goals, stability, and power take precedence over individual freedoms and rights to maintain state authority and cohesion.

Unlike the realist's perspective who predict great power struggles between the liberal international order and authoritarianism over the shape of international norms and institutions (Mearsheimer 2019), I argue that the liberal international order and the international norms and international institutions that characterize it will endure (Ikenberry 2018). The current international system is not solely dependent on American hegemonic power; rather, it is based on a broader set of organising principles and institutions that have evolved over centuries. This order provides incentives and opportunities for states to integrate into its economic and political frameworks, creating expanding constituencies with a vested interest in its preservation. Notably, China has demonstrated an interest in maintaining an open and multilateral global system, even while challenging U.S. hegemony. China's remarkable economic rise was made possible because the liberal international order rewarded its embrace of openness and trade-driven growth (ibid).

Argentina's decision to decline the invitation to join BRICS under President Javier Milei highlights the complex ideological and geopolitical challenges facing the newly expanded BRICS+5 bloc. The situation underscores key issues facing BRICS+5, including the ideological and geopolitical diversity and differences among its members (Mia 2024).

Compared to BRICS, the BRICS+5 projects a strong asymmetrical image wherein its bias tends clearly towards authoritarianism, initially carried by China and Russia's authoritarianism, now firmly supported, by the admission of four more authoritarian states, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There exists an unambiguous polarization within the BRICS+5 group, between countries that uphold democratic norms and those that suppress political freedoms and dissent.

China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, and Egypt exhibit strong authoritarian characteristics with centralised control over political power, limited public political participation, and restricted press freedom. Brazil, India, and South Africa generally uphold democratic processes such as regular elections and some degree of judicial independence and media freedom. Ethiopia presents a complex scenario where there have been efforts and movements towards democracy, but recent conflicts and governmental actions lean towards authoritarian practices.

This division in BRICS+5 membership creates challenges for cooperation, as differences in regime type are associated with higher levels of distrust (Fracalossi de Moraes 2020). These intragroup power asymmetries, dominated by China and Russia, also raised fears among BRICS members of potential unequal agreements and therefore likely to hinder cooperation (ibid). This situation has the potential to be exacerbated in BRICS+5, particularly as member states including India, Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are assiduously balancing their highly valued relations with the US and its allies.

But despite this significant variation in political ideologies among BRICS+5, strategic bilateral alignments exist between the members for common economic and geopolitical benefits (Cooper and Farooq 2013). Despite the ideological differences, BRICS+5 members find common ground in economic interests, a desire for greater global influence, and the goal of reshaping aspects of the international order to better suit their collective interests (Brosig 2024).

For these reasons, BRICS+5 should not be analysed myopically, since it is a complex grouping of individual states managing bilateralism and multilateralism contemporaneously. BRICS+5 is a complex multilateral forum that balances individual state interests with collective action. While members manage bilateral tensions, such as the China-India border dispute, they cooperate on shared objectives like sustainable development through institutions like the New Development Bank (Vazquez 2021).

The complexities of BRICS+5 have been interpreted from different perspectives. Democratizing the post-war liberal world order has been argued as a positive development that will lead towards increasing the representation and influence of emerging economies in global decision-making processes, particularly within institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, where the USA currently holds significant sway (Nuruzzaman 2020). While these countries seek to democratise global institutions like the World Bank and IMF, it has been argued that their impact remains limited due to internal differences and lack of a cohesive vision. The new institutions like the Contingency Reserve Arrangement and New Development Bank have emerged as alternatives, some commentators are arguing they are unlikely to supplant the existing Bretton Woods institutions (Lipsy 2017).

Alternatively, from a completely different perspective, the expansion of BRICS to include additional authoritarian countries, is seen as a strategic shift towards a more authoritarian-oriented coalition. This is particularly evident with the influence of China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Putin, who are leveraging this expansion to promote and protect their individual interests. The political and ideological heterogeneity within BRICS+5, with China and Russia being more authoritarian, contrasts with the democratic systems of India, Brazil, and South Africa, highlighting the diverse nature of the coalition.

A strategic shift towards a more authoritarian-oriented coalition in BRICS could have several consequences. It may exacerbate geopolitical tensions between BRICS and liberal democracies, as the coalition could be perceived as a counterbalance to liberal influence. The ideological and political differences between authoritarian and democratic members within BRICS could lead to internal friction, affecting the group's cohesion and effectiveness. Such a shift might influence global governance structures, potentially leading to reforms that reflect the interests of authoritarian regimes, thereby challenging the liberal democratic norms traditionally upheld by liberal institutions. The coalition might prioritize economic policies that favor state-led development models, which could impact global trade and investment patterns. An authoritarian-oriented coalition might downplay human rights issues, affecting international efforts to promote human rights and democratic governance as is evident in the current stance of the South and its contrasting response to the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East (Schirm 2023).

The liberal international order emphasises democracy, market economy and universal human rights as guiding principles for the international order, whereas the illiberal states prioritise national autonomy, non-intervention in internal affairs and state-permeated economies. Hence, the illiberal states rejected military aid to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, instead cultivating a good relationship with Moscow and criticizing liberal conceptions of world order as paternalistic. It has also been argued that the BRICS countries, especially Russia and China, have actively shaped the current security order by preventing the outcomes preferred by liberal democracies in conflicts like Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and South Sudan. In this regard the preferred outcomes (removal of Assad, isolation of Russia) have been actively prevented by BRICS (Brosig and Brosig 2019).

Within BRICS+5, Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically been regional rivals, and India and China have serious ongoing border disputes, which only four years ago erupted in military conflict. China and Russia until recently have long held frosty relations arising from deeply embedded mistrust and residual Cold War tensions. 'India and the PRC have conflicting interests and visions concerning the future of Asia and, by extension, the broader global order'<sup>2</sup>.

BRICS nations are described as 'a heterogeneous composition, marked by diverse civilisational and cultural contexts' (ibid). This diversity makes it challenging to establish BRICS as a 'coherent and pertinent geopolitical bloc' (ibid). The expansion of BRICS, to BRICS+5 further complicates this dynamic by introducing more diverse interests and potential conflicts (e.g., between Saudi Arabia and Iran)<sup>3</sup>.

While some analysts fear BRICS+5 seeks to replace the existing global order, evidence suggests the group aims more for reform than replacement (Diplomat July 2024). The joint statement from BRICS foreign ministers in 2024 indicates a desire for 'a more agile, effective, efficient, responsive, representative, legitimate, democratic and accountable international and multilateral system' suggests a strategy of working within existing frameworks while pushing for greater representation of the Global South (ibid).

A key area of alignment among BRICS members is in economic cooperation and efforts to reduce dependence on the US dollar. The group has explored creating a reference unit between their currencies and establishing alternative financial institutions like the New Development Bank (Geneva Policy Outlook). Despite internal tensions, BRICS+5 has demonstrated its ability to provide geopolitical leverage for members, such as supporting Russia in the face of sanctions, demonstrating the group's potential to challenge aspects of the existing global order (Polytechnique Insights). There are areas where BRICS+5 members find strong alignment, particularly in sectors like raw materials and energy. BRICS+5 has become a major player in oil, metals, and food production markets, potentially leading to the development of a "mineral bloc" or coordination of extractive and trade policies (ibid).

Notwithstanding the competing and divergent interest of members in BRICS+, there exist forces and mechanisms which work in favour of balancing them against each other. For example, the establishment of institutions like the New Development Bank and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement provides a platform for cooperation and dialogue, helping to mediate differences and align interests through shared economic projects and financial stability mechanisms. Despite political differences, BRICS+5 countries share common economic goals, such as enhancing trade, investment, and infrastructure development, which can serve as a unifying force. BRICS has traditionally held regular summits and meetings offering opportunities for diplomatic engagement, allowing members to negotiate and reconcile their differences while promoting mutual interests.

Moreover, most BRICS+5 members hold a common opposition to liberal dominance, particularly that of the USA, which acts as a cohesive factor, encouraging members to collaborate despite their divergent political systems and interests. Finally, and importantly, the flexibility of BRICS+5 allows for varying degrees of cooperation on different issues, enabling members to pursue bilateral or multilateral initiatives that align with their national interests while maintaining overall group cohesion. A caveat to this last factor is that bilateralism can thwarts the development of a common narrative on global issues like health, security, and trade (Vazquez 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This article's exploration of BRICS+5's strategic shift towards a more authoritarian coalition and its potential impact on global governance sets the stage for a deeper examination of how these dynamics might influence the persistence and transformation of the liberal international order

The expansion of BRICS to BRICS+5 in 2024, with the inclusion of Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Ethiopia, marks a significant shift in the coalition's dynamics. This expansion leans towards a more authoritarian governance model, challenging the democratic balance previously maintained by India, Brazil, and South Africa. Such a shift raises concerns about the internal cohesion of the group and its ability to establish a unified agenda. While BRICS+5 presents opportunities for member states to assert influence and promote a multipolar world, it also risks potential chaos due to ideological diversity and power asymmetries, particularly with China and Russia playing dominant roles.

Despite these challenges, the member states share common economic interests and a collective desire to reshape global governance. This could lead to the promotion of a more state-led development model, impacting international norms and human rights advocacy. The coalition's success will largely depend on its ability to navigate internal tensions while pursuing its collective goals.

The BRICS group, originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has been increasingly challenging the existing international order. Rather than seeking to completely replace

global governance structures, BRICS aims to reform them. This coalition is viewed as a potential economic alliance focused on resource management and geopolitical influence. Various analyses suggest that BRICS is advocating for a multipolar world that better reflects the interests of emerging economies.

In conclusion, the expansion to BRICS+5 represents both opportunities and challenges. The coalition's future effectiveness will hinge on its ability to manage internal diversity and power dynamics while advancing a shared agenda. Further research is needed to explore the evolving nature of BRICS+5, particularly in terms of its internal dynamics, economic strategies, and influence on international norms. This research will provide deeper insights into the coalition's role in reshaping the global order.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Ikenberry, defines an international order as “the ‘governing’ arrangements among a group of states, including its fundamental rules, principles, and institutions”, and a liberal international order as one that “is open and loosely rule based”, creating “a foundation in which states can engage in reciprocity and institutionalized cooperation”, Ikenberry, G. I. (2011), *Liberal Leviathan*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

<sup>2</sup> Council on Geostrategy. (n.d.). How does BRICS challenge the prevailing international order? *Britain’s World*. Retrieved from <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/how-does-brics-challenge-the-prevailing-international-order/>

<sup>3</sup> Polytechnique Insights. (n.d.). The BRICS: Economic alliance or future private club of raw materials? Retrieved from <https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/geopolitics/the-brics-economic-alliance-or-future-private-club-of-raw-materials/>