

EXPERT INTERVIEW

The famous Polish Indologist Dr. Krzysztof Iwanek (KI) spoke with Dr. Mansi (KM) to share his views on BRICS and India's role in it. Dr. Iwanek is India Coordinator at Institute for Eastern Studies, Poland. He is also an Associate Research Fellow at Institute of Security and Defence Policy, Sweden. Dr. Iwanek has authored two books on India. He frequently visits India and has appeared in various Indian news outlets as well. He also writes for *The Diplomat* and other media outlets.



KM: What is your assessment of BRICS expansion? Do you think BRICS expansion will dilute the mandate of founding members?

KI: If BRICS is to remain focused on politically neutral economic issues, its expansion won't dilute its founding members' mandate. However, if BRICS is to have common national security interests, its expansion will dilute this objective. A common national security interest for Russia and China would naturally be rivalry with the US, and that's something India wouldn't be on board with. But it's not only about India. I think an alliance against the US as such may be formed one day. I find it very likely that it will be led by China and Russia. I find it very likely that a country like Iran or North Korea could be a part of it. But BRICS can't serve this role. I don't think Brazil would like to be in it, or South Africa. And perhaps it's no surprise that Saudi Arabia, one of the US' main partners in the Middle East, is apparently still considering whether to join BRICS.

Something similar happened to the SCO, I assume - the organization could have been united by a common anti-US agenda but expanding it diluted this objective. But the fact that the SCO didn't become an anti-US alliance, and the fact that BRICS too can't become such an alliance, doesn't have to mean that another platform can't be created to form it. In the meantime, BRICS, I assume, will remain mostly focused on economy.

KM: Do you see BRICS as an alternative to the US led institutional (monetary and political) system?

KI: Not in the foreseeable future. There is a lot of talk about this, but the truth seems to be that there are little results. For instance, there was recently a lot of speculation about a common BRICS currency, an alternative to the US dollar, but I don't see this confirmed anywhere: what is that currency? Who is introducing it and to be used where? BRICS economies like India remain very intertwined with the Western banking system, would-be BRICS economies, like that of Saudi Arabia, are also economically tied to the US. Again, it doesn't have to mean that such an alternative is not possible - it's just that it seems much further away than the Russians and the Chinese would like to admit.

KM: What is your view of the impact of India-China bilateral relationship on the overall functioning of BRICS?

KI: Firstly, as mentioned before, I think India and China share no national security interest. More than that, as it is widely known, their national security interests clash with each other. This remains one of the main reasons why BRICS can't become an alliance, although, as stated above, I don't think South Africa or Brazil would like to be in such an alliance too. As Sino-Indian relations are growing worse, not better, it may be even puzzling why India is in BRICS at all. But I think New Delhi's calculus here is more and less this: (a) Being in BRICS is also about keeping good relations with other countries, such as Russia, even at the cost of being in one organization with China; (b) It looks good for India's foreign policy narrative, because New Delhi doesn't want to be seen as being in alliance with the West (or with Russia, for that matter). (c) As long as such a multilateral organization that brings together India and China is mostly focused on economy, and thus not seen as political, and if such an organization is not clearly dominated by China, India is still open to such form of multilateral, politically neutral cooperation with China. After all, India is in the AIIB and is actually one of the main recipients of AIIB loans, even though the primary force behind the establishment of AIIB was China.

KM: Do you think BRICS currency can become a reality? What are the major hurdles as per your assessment?

KI: I have partially replied to this regarding other questions already. I think this is a long way ahead. All the recent talk about a BRICS currency, when checked carefully, seems to be gossip originating from sources such as the Russian embassy in South Africa. Contrary to what was reported in some sources, the recent BRICS summit in Johannesburg didn't declare a plan to establish such a currency. What the declaration said was stressing the significance of national currencies (of BRICS countries) in the international trade. Also, the BRICS's bank, the New Development Bank, declared that 30% of its loans would be in national currencies. But other than that, let us remember that even the New Development Bank uses the USD as its currency.

And as long as there is no such thing as a BRICS currency - and let me stress again that it's not being even created and we don't know if it ever will be - the other option would be to promote one of the BRICS countries' currencies to make it play a larger role in international exchange. And then the question arises: whose? While I understand that there are countries (and some other entities) which are unhappy with the dominance of the US dollar, I don't think they would like to swap it for a new kind of dominance. I assume the Chinese would be happy to make their currency a rival of the USD in this regard, but would India like to be as dependent on the PRC yuan as dollar in its international trade?

KM: Do you think European countries like France should join BRICS?

Short reply would be - no, because of Russia. And China too, but to a comparatively smaller degree: Russia would be the main reason.

To give a slightly longer reply: again, this boils down to the first question. Is BRICS to pursue common national security interests only? If so, then hardly any European country would be interested, since that would also imply sharing such interests with Russia and China (and now also with a new BRICS entrant, Iran). Perhaps the current Hungarian government could wish to be a part of BRICS, perhaps the Serbian one, but there wouldn't be many more takers beyond that.

But if BRICS is to evolve towards neutral economic cooperation, then I think there would have been a chance to have European countries there (should they be invited), if it hadn't been for Russia's aggressive behaviour. Let me return to the case of AIIB. Many European countries joined the AIIB, including Poland, even though it was clear that AIIB is being created mainly by China (Russia is also part of the

AIIB but is seemingly not as important in the organization as the PRC). But AIIB was seen as politically neutral and European member states assumed that it was still fine to join it even in the face of growing US-China rivalry. But BRICS has both Russia and China as key components, and that's too much of a heavy, negative political combination for most European states. Especially because of Russian behavior towards Ukraine: first the partial invasion of 2014, then the full one of 2022. Especially since 2022, most of Europe wants to show that a majority (not all) of our ties with Russia have been cut and thus wouldn't like to join an organization where Russia plays a pivotal role. Had the AIIB been formed now, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and not before, and had it had Russia as its member even in such a scenario, as it has now, then I think many European countries wouldn't have joined the AIIB.
