

The BRICS Group as a Specific Phenomenon in International Relations

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Abstract

In the first decade of the new millennium, in response to contemporary global developments, (such as power shifts following the end of the Cold War and the crisis of globalisation), the BRICS group was formed. This informal coalition of countries can be regarded as a new phenomenon in international relations, particularly in terms of the status of the cooperating countries, the form of their cooperation, and, above all, their ambitions and goals. The functioning of BRICS in the global context remains a topical issue in both print and electronic media. This article aims to familiarise readers with the circumstances surrounding the formation of this group, its global position, development and institutional structure, as well as the geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects of its functioning.

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Kľúčové slová: BRICS, globálne usporiadanie, integrácia, multipolarita, geopolitika.

Introduction

The BRICS group can be considered a new phenomenon in international relations in several respects. Until recently, this grouping was characterised as an alliance of future global economic powers symbolically regarded as *emerging markets* (Enderwick, 2007). Nowadays, however, countries whose economic potential does not correspond to these characteristics have also become part of the group.

BRICS represents a new dimension in international relations in that it meets the following criteria:

1. it brings together countries outside Western civilisation (the United States' attempt at obtaining observer status was rejected in 2009);

2. it promotes the idea of weakening the dominance of Western civilisation and, in political terms, the hegemony of the United States;
3. it possesses considerable and diverse economic, political, and cultural potential;
4. it is developing amid the most profound crisis of the global economic model created by the West – one of unprecedented scale (Cimek, 2013).

The emergence and functioning of this group have been widely reported in the world media. This is because BRICS represents a grouping of states that do not share membership in a particular region (such as the European Union – EU, the North American Free Trade Agreement – NAFTA, or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation – APEC) or in the production and export of a specific commodity (such as the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries – OPEC).

Moreover, the emergence of the BRICS group in the first decade of this millennium was connected with a number of economic and political stimuli. Nowadays, the BRICS group is perceived as an important economic and geopolitical player on the global scene. At the same time, however, it is important to mention the factors that weaken the global position of this group, and are discussed below. The name of the group originated as an acronym consisting of the initial letters of the English names of the countries that formed it back in 2011 (i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

The formation of the BRICS group

As Leichtová (2011: 68) argues, “the rise of new centres in the international system led to the formation of several new informal groups of states that were supposed to highlight the transformation of the balance of power after the end of the Cold War” (translated by authors). The BRICS group can be considered a typical example of such a grouping. The association of India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA), established in 2003, can be considered the predecessor of BRICS.

Some authors link the cooperation of the four large states, which led to the creation of the informal BRICS group, with the great crisis of globalisation, with 2008 regarded as a turning point. This crisis marked the end of the monopoly with which the West had determined the course of world history since the 16th century, both in military, political, economic, and technological terms, as well as in the sphere of thought (Kučniar, 2011; Artus & Virard, 2008).

Subsequently, countries whose economic and political potential implied a strengthening of their global position sought to assert themselves. One of the ways to achieve this goal was through mutual cooperation, which, provided that previous conflicts were eliminated, would ensure conditions for economic development and growth in the importance of international relations. As Zajączkowski (2013) contends, the leaders of these countries were convinced that their position and role in the global economy would mainly depend on their mutual economic cooperation.

The formation of the BRICS group is linked to the publication of a study by J. O'Neill, who held managerial positions at Goldman Sachs. In his expert opinion, presented on November 30, 2001, he predicted rapid economic growth in India, China, Russia and Brazil, emphasising the growing importance of these countries in the global economy. O'Neill argued that these states would, in the foreseeable future, reach levels of wealth comparable to those of the G7 countries – if not surpass them.

The origins of the BRICS group (at that time, South Africa had not yet joined) date back to the 61st session of the United Nations General Assembly, during which informal diplomatic exchanges took place on June 23, 2006, among China, India, Russia and Brazil (Furik et al., 2022). This dialogue led to the initiation of regular diplomatic coordination, originally maintained through meetings of foreign ministers. Since 2009, cooperation has been further reinforced through summits of the heads of state and government of the four founding members – and, after South Africa's accession in 2011, of all five BRICS countries.

Geopolitical and geoeconomic position and structure of the BRICS group

Before its expansion after 2024, the BRICS group comprised four of the ten most populous countries in the world, with a combined population representing more than 40% of the global total. At the same time, the total area of the BRICS countries – almost 40 million km² – covered nearly a quarter of the Earth's surface. These figures confirm the group's ambitions regarding the economic growth potential of its member states. From an economic perspective, four BRICS countries rank among the fifteen largest economies in the world: China has the second-largest economy, India ranks fifth, Russia ninth and Brazil eleventh.

These figures testify to the global importance of the BRICS group. However, it should be noted that four of the five members of the group prior to its expansion derive a significant portion of their revenues from exports of

energy resources (Russia), coal (China and Russia), metal ores (Brazil), and precious stones (South Africa). The weakness of the BRICS countries in this context lies in their lower level of infrastructure development and, with the exception of China, their lagging behind in technological innovation, which also poses challenges to deeper cooperation. Other internal complications further weaken the group's members, including structural problems in their economies, corruption, income inequality, political instability, and related issues. These weaknesses were further compounded by the admission of new members after 2024.

However, the realistic approach of the group's representatives after its formation was evidenced by a statement adopted at the group's first summit in 2009, held in Yekaterinburg (Russia), according to which BRICS had no ambition to replace the importance and status of the G20 summits (Furik et al., 2022).

In the meantime, however, under the influence of global geopolitical developments in the context of increased international tensions and the strengthening of economic and cooperation, the group's self-confidence has grown. This is related, among other things, to the awareness of its military position, which is based primarily on China and Russia, which, together with India, have nuclear capabilities.

The BRICS documents, adopted at the summit in New Delhi, India, in 2021 set out three pillars that are to form the basis for the development of the group's member states:

- cooperation in the fields of politics and security, based on collaboration in global and regional security issues, as well as global developments in favour of creating a multipolar world;
- cooperation in the fields of economics and finance, aimed at supporting economic growth and development for mutual prosperity;
- cooperation in the fields of culture and interpersonal relations in the form of support for networking activities, i.e. establishing relationships between people, mutual exchange of information and maintaining personal contacts.

Institutional structure of the BRICS group

The group under discussion does not possess an institutional structure corresponding to that of an international organisation. The acronym BRICS, therefore, denotes rather a connection among the member countries in the form of summits attended by their highest representatives. In this context,

the institution of the presidency was established, with the presiding country responsible for organising the summit.

The foundation of BRICS cooperation lies in meetings of heads of state (summits), during which ministers and experts also convene in working groups.

These meetings of BRICS representatives result in joint statements by working groups at various levels, including those of the highest representatives. At the summits, decisions were gradually taken to deepen mutual cooperation, which also resulted in the formation of new institutions.

At the BRICS summit in New Delhi in 2012, India proposed the establishment of a joint development bank. This initiative was fulfilled in 2013 at the summit in Fortaleza in Brazil. With the signing of the *Agreement on the New Development Bank*, the *New Development Bank (NDB)* was established. The NDB's purpose is to support the development of the economies not only of BRICS members but also of other countries. In addition, all countries recognised by the United Nations are eligible to become members of the bank (Furik et al., 2022).

The bank is managed by a five-member Board of Governors, composed of ministers responsible for finance. This board is chaired by a president, a position held on a rotating basis. Four vice presidents also participate in managing the NDB. In addition, a five-member Board of Directors oversees the bank's activities, with responsibility for the work of four committees, each covering a different area of competence.

In 2014, an agreement was signed to establish the *Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA)*, which was tasked with managing a joint reserve fund. The purpose of this fund is to protect the economies of the countries in the group in the event of an economic crisis in order to maintain their financial stability. The CRA also has a Board of Governors.

The BRICS expansion and international cooperation

On August 24, 2023, at a summit in Johannesburg in South Africa, the future expansion of the group to include several countries from the South was announced. Six countries expressed interest in joining: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On January 1, 2024, BRICS expanded to include four countries, as Argentina withdrew from the cooperation. Saudi Arabia ratified the accession agreement but has not yet confirmed its membership, which it is still considering. On January 1, 2025, Indonesia became a member of the group (following this expansion, the acronym BRICS+ has also been used for the

group). Ten countries (Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam) have been considered as partner countries since the Kazan summit in 2024. In addition, several other countries have expressed their interest in joining the group.

According to Ferran (2025), after the expansion, almost half of the world's population lives in the BRICS countries, and their economies account for more than a quarter of global GDP. This expansion not only strengthens the group in terms of population and economic position, but also opens up the possibility of its future institutionalisation towards the formation of an international organisation. This development would result from the need to strengthen coordination, also in view of the possibility of admitting other states. However, as Iwanek (2023) maintains, the expansion of the group does not necessarily mean that this change will take place, and BRICS will continue to function primarily as a forum for dialogue.

The group is developing cooperation with groups which share a similar focus. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in 2015, representatives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union participated in the BRICS summit in Ufa in the Russian Federation. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the Russian Federation is a member of all three groups.

Geopolitical analysis of the BRICS group

Before its expansion in 2024, the five BRICS countries were mainly united by common political and economic interests, stemming from their ambition to strengthen their global position through joint efforts. However, there were also persistent disagreements among them, resulting from geopolitical rivalry. This can be exemplified by the complicated relationship between China and India concerning border disputes and the assertion of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Disagreements between China and Russia over dominance in Central and North Asia and the Far East have been pragmatically set aside in favour of their shared interest in countering U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

In particular, Russia, emphasises the role of BRICS as a global alternative to a world still dominated by the West. In this connection, the emergence and development of the group is supported by Russia, also in view of the need to create global multipolarity aimed at counterbalancing the dominance of the United States. In addition, participation in BRICS activities can be a solution to international isolation, as is the case with Iran.

For Iwanek (2023), the trend of BRICS developing into an anti-American coalition will not materialise. Such a direction would be possible if it consisted only of countries that perceive the United States as a threat. Such a grouping could only be formed around the tandem of Russia and China in conjunction with Iran. Radical anti-American sentiments are not evident in the politics of India, Brazil, South Africa or Egypt. Overall, it can be argued that the foreign policy goals of the individual BRICS countries overlap, as already mentioned, especially in the need for economic cooperation. However, it should also be noted that the group is not unanimous on major international political issues. Furthermore, after its expansion, BRICS represents a highly heterogeneous group of countries from an economic point of view. On the one hand, there are large countries aspiring to become global powers (China, India, Russia) and, on the other hand, regional powers (Brazil, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Indonesia). Moreover, there are less developed countries (Ethiopia) or states with a one-sided economy (United Arab Emirates).

Conclusion

To conclude, the functioning of BRICS can be compared to that of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which likewise has no plans to admit advanced Western states. Similarly, China's power ambitions to create a global alternative to the United States play a significant role in both groupings. The macro-regional affiliation of the member states has proven insufficient to consolidate political cooperation within the organisation. As in the case of BRICS, the membership of the SCO comprises a heterogeneous group of countries, some of which have geopolitical animosities with one another, potentially leading to divergences in their common interests and goals (Iwanek, 2023).

In the same way as the SCO, BRICS is more likely to evolve into a grouping primarily based on economic and financial cooperation. In the current geopolitical constellation, its transformation into a unified, politically coherent anti-Western bloc with effective international influence cannot be envisaged. This is partly due to the fact that the member states hold differing positions on many international issues. Therefore, it may be assumed that China will continue to play a dominant role within the grouping.

Given the aforementioned observations, it could be interesting in the future to evaluate the accuracy of Cimek's (2013) assertion that BRICS, despite its low level of formalisation, has the potential to reshape the global order in economic, political, and even military contexts.

The near or more distant future will reveal whether the group's aspirations will be fulfilled – aspirations which, according to the Polish political scientist, feature the following: transforming the world from unipolar to multipolar; promoting dialogue among civilisations instead of their conflict; establishing an alliance of the semi-periphery against the domination of the centre; developing an economy based on industry, technology and services rather than financial capitalism; achieving monetary multipolarity instead of reliance on the U.S. dollar; reforming the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; reforming the United Nations Security Council; promoting international law as a means of conflict resolution rather than the use of force; supporting the development of the middle class instead of the subordination of the state to the oligarchy; and endorsing balanced development over the neoliberal pursuit of profit maximisation by private investors.

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