

New world order

The burgeoning Brics bloc, which seeks alternatives to Western-led institutions, is being leveraged by China and Russia to forge a 'fairer', more multipolar world

BY MARIA SIOW

IN A WORLD increasingly defined by its fractures, last week's gathering of emerging nations in Russia came at a pivotal time in global geopolitics.

As the Brics bloc – now expanded to include nine countries – seeks to redefine the rules of engagement, a growing chorus of developing nations have voiced their eagerness to join, raising questions about global security and the quest for a more equitable world order.

The allure of Brics, which originally comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, lies not just in its economic potential but in its challenge to the Western-dominated status quo.

At the summit from Tuesday to Thursday, the bloc also welcomed Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates as member states for the first time. Saudi Arabia has yet to officially join, but is closely involved with the group, while a host of other countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar have formally submitted, or are considering, applications for membership.

Analysts caution that the West, and the United States in particular, should not attempt to dissuade nations from joining the bloc. Instead, they argue, a more constructive approach would involve addressing the grievances that have driven these countries towards a "search for alternatives".

Any attempt to sway nations away from Brics is likely to backfire, according to Sarang Shidore, director of the Global South programme at the Quincy Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

Western nations "should examine where they are falling short on their policies, especially towards the Global South", he said, referring to developing nations



RIGHT:
RUSSIAN
PRESIDENT
VLADIMIR
PUTIN
WELCOME
CHINA'S XI
JINPING TO
THE BRICS
SUMMIT IN
KAZAN.
Photo: Handout

with lower economic and social development.

"They need to accept the reality of hedging behaviour and work to win influence by focusing on mutual interests rather than trying to change the interests of other states."

Shidore argued for a reinvigoration of US-backed international institutions such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization, which have been increasingly sidelined amid rising tensions.

With Brics now accounting for 45 per cent of the world's population and over one-third of the global economy, further expansion could herald a shift in the Western-led world order.



Yet this growth also complicates the bloc's identity, said Jagannath Panda, head of the Institute for Security and Development Policy's Stockholm Centre for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs.

Brics was transforming from a group of emerging economies to include developed and "not-so-emerging economies", he said, creating in the process "a geopolitical ring with the lead of China and the strong support of Russia ... to challenge the American-led Western order".

"The expansion of Brics suggests that the divide between the West and the rest is only going to expand," Panda said, cautioning that the bloc's growth

could lead to divisions in global governance.

Meanwhile, US allies such as Japan appear increasingly uneasy as more Southeast Asian nations express interest in joining Brics – worried that the likes of Malaysia and fellow prospective member Thailand, historically known for their balanced diplomatic stances, may be drifting away from neutral positions, analysts say.

The involvement of 36 countries, including 20 heads of state, at last week's Brics summit in Kazan made it "the largest foreign policy event ever held" on Russian soil, according to Yuri Ushakov, an aide to President Vladimir Putin.

Putin himself lauded Russia-China cooperation as "one of the main stabilising factors" in global affairs, as he welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping to a face-to-face meeting – their third this year – on the sidelines of the summit.

The two countries intended to work together more closely "to ensure global security and promote a fairer world order", Putin said.

In his remarks, Xi emphasised that "the world is undergoing a major change that has not been seen in a century", but said China and Russia had "explored a

ABOVE: PUTIN CHAIRS A MEETING OF BRICS LEADERS ON WEDNESDAY. Photo: brics-russia2024.ru/ Handout via dpa

Continued on p. 10

Continued from p. 9

correct way for neighbouring major powers to coexist without forming alliances, engaging in confrontation or targeting third parties”.

He further articulated a need for urgent reform of the international financial architecture, calling on Brics nations to lead the way.

The summit's 43-page final communique, while ambitious, was vague, outlining various projects to facilitate trade between Brics nations, including an alternative payment system to the US dollar, yet lacking specifics or timelines.

Although it touched on pressing global issues, including geopolitics and artificial intelligence, the mention of Ukraine was limited, only once noting “with appreciation relevant proposals of mediation” aimed at a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The toughest language was reserved for the Middle East, calling for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and denouncing Israeli “attacks against humanitarian operations, facilities, personnel and distribution points”.

Russia and China are keen to cement relationships in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, said Ja Ian Chong, an associate political-science professor at the National University of Singapore, who also noted that both nations are currently navigating geopolitical pressures and sanctions from the US and its allies.

Moscow faces wide-ranging economic sanctions following its invasion of Ukraine while Beijing has claimed that Washington is seeking to “contain, encircle and suppress” it, Chong said.

“Such ties enable [both countries] ... to obtain key minerals and other raw materials and access markets,” he said.

‘THE RACE IS ON’

Recent seismic shifts in the geopolitical landscape, such as

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and intensifying US-China rivalry, have fuelled “a surge of interest among Global South states” in joining Brics, according to the Quincy Institute's Shidore.

For many in the Global South, these developments signalled a disintegration of the existing world order, prompting fears of a looming systemic crisis.

“As by far the most important systemic power, the US is the lead manager of the global system, and when it begins to fail, states begin to lose confidence in this leadership. This motivates a search for alternatives,” Shidore said, noting that countries pursuing Brics membership were not necessarily looking to replace the current system, but rather to revive and strengthen its more equitable aspects.

Southeast Asia's renewed interest in Brics reflects a broader shift towards multipolarity, said Anu Anwar, a non-resident associate at Harvard University's Fairbank Centre for Chinese Studies.

Nations in the region view Brics as a platform to balance relationships, diversify economic ties, and amplify their voices in global governance, he said. The bloc's focus on “South-South cooperation” and

financial independence, particularly through the New Development Bank, adds to its allure.

The multilateral development bank established by Brics in 2014 “offers these states a way to hedge their strategic positions in an increasingly polarised world”, Anwar said.

To counter the momentum of countries flocking to the bloc, Anwar argued that the West “must confront the underlying grievances, including the collective frustrations of the non-Western world over exclusion from global decision-making processes”.

A fairer redistribution of power and reforms in institutions such as the UN, World Bank and International Monetary Fund would be essential, he told *This Week in Asia*.

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, aligning with a bloc in which Moscow plays a leading role might have appeared risky for US allies such as Thailand and the UAE, said geopolitical analyst Geoffrey Miller from the Victoria University of Wellington's Democracy Project in New Zealand.

However, as the conflict has evolved, US calls for solidarity with Ukraine have lost some of their potency, he said – particularly in light of the ongoing war in Gaza, which has “seen Washington cede much of the moral high ground over its near unconditional support for Israel”.

Any group that includes both China and India “deserves to be taken seriously”, Miller said, adding: “for the US and its allies and partners, the lesson of the Brics expansion has to be that the race is on”.

Rather than attempting to undermine the bloc, Miller suggested that the West should focus on providing meaningful alternatives, noting that initiatives such as Apec and the G20 – groups that include pivotal Brics members – could serve as platforms for collaboration.

Washington must also ensure that its initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework are “more about substance than rhetoric”, he said, criticising the US for past protectionist stances – particularly its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017 under former President Donald Trump, which remains a sore point for many in the Asia-Pacific.

“There is probably no bigger carrot than free trade access to the US, which remains the world's biggest economy,” Miller said.

Growing interest in Brics is also tied to India's rising stature as an autonomous geopolitical player, said Brian Wong, a geopolitical strategist and assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong.

India's recent diplomatic manoeuvres, particularly its responses to tensions with Canada and its “remarkable ability to fence-sit when it comes to the war in Ukraine”, illustrate its increasing significance.

“More countries view Brics-plus as a conducive platform and basis for accruing similar levels of political cachet and geopolitical versatility,” Wong told *This Week in Asia*.

New Delhi's assertiveness has been evident in its diplomatic fallout with Canada over accusations of assassination linked to Sikh separatists. India has also maintained its relationship with Russia despite the Ukraine war, continuing to purchase oil while engaging both Kyiv and Moscow.

On the eve of the Brics summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveyed to Putin his desire for peace in Ukraine, signalling his country's willingness to help achieve a resolution to one of Europe's deadliest conflicts since World War Two.



FOR THE U.S. AND ITS ALLIES, THE LESSON OF BRICS EXPANSION HAS TO BE THAT THE RACE IS ON

Geoffrey Miller, analyst



AN EVEN BIGGER BRICS?

During last week's summit, Putin revealed that more than 30 nations states had expressed interest in joining Brics, as he also stressed the need to maintain balance in any expansion.

While there is no fixed timeline for admitting new members, Quincy Institute's Shidore said the consensus-based decision-making process of Brics would inevitably slow down as the group grows.

“But a larger Brics also can be more influential,” he said, while cautioning that an expanded bloc might dilute the dominance of China and Russia, as each member state is likely to prioritise its own interests “and not simply kowtow to Moscow and Beijing”.

Yet the bloc's true geopolitical power hinges on “the strategic alignment and leadership of its most powerful members”, Harvard University's Anwar said, even if expanded membership could enhance the bloc's legitimacy as a representative voice for the Global South.

“For Brics to evolve into a truly impactful entity capable of shaping the global order, it must develop



two critical components: a unified threat perception and a coherent alternative vision of world order, both of which are currently absent,” he said.

“Without these shared foundations, Brics will continue to struggle to act as a decisive force in reshaping global governance.”

That said, Brics is still an “incredibly burgeoning and fledgling bloc at its core”, said the University of Hong Kong’s Wong, adding that simply increasing membership does not equate to strength.

“All existing members, including China and Russia, must watch out for the perils of an overexpanded, overstretched and insufficiently coherent Brics,” he said.

CHINA’S ROLE

Through Brics and its expansion, China aims to reinforce ties with the Global South and diminish global reliance on the US dollar while promoting the use of its own currency, said Jagannath from the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

“The intent is to polarise the world and make

PUTIN AND XI POSE WITH OTHER LEADERS FOR A GROUP PHOTO AT LAST WEEK’S BRICS SUMMIT. Photo: Brics/dpa

them stay connected and dependent on the Eurasian powers such as China, if not Russia,” he said, noting the limitations of this ambition as China’s image is “still far from solid” in much of the Global South.

Beijing has sought to position itself as a champion of the Global South in recent years. A position paper released for last month’s annual session of the UN General Assembly highlighted China’s support for developing nations and called for greater representation for these countries in global forums, including the UN – a change Beijing has long urged.

China’s other goal of reducing dollar dependence has grown increasingly significant in light of its deepening economic ties with Russia since the onset of the Ukraine war in February 2022, Jagannath said.

Last year, bilateral trade between Russia and China surged to a record high of US\$240 billion, driven in part by sanctions imposed on Moscow. The share of Chinese yuan in Russia’s imports has skyrocketed from 5 per cent to between 20 to 25 per cent since the invasion, according to a paper by Elina Ribakova, a non-resident senior fellow at

the Peterson Institute for International Economics, published in December.

Putin urged Brics nations at the summit to collaborate on overhauling the global financial system and ending the dominance of the US dollar.

According to a document prepared by Russia’s finance ministry and central bank, Moscow’s proposal for a new payments system would link commercial banks through the Brics countries’ central banks.

While the practicality of achieving an alternative payment system or de-dollarisation remains to be seen, the Democracy Project’s Miller argued that the annual Brics summit itself served a valuable purpose.

“Much in the same way that the Apec summit remains valuable, despite the bloc under-delivering in terms of hard outcomes,” he said.

“While a growing Brics membership may make it harder to gain consensus on specific aims, its relevance and status as a Global South forum will continue to rise in the near term.” ■

Additional reporting by Reuters