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BRICS in 2026: A reordering platform?

Introduction

Recent geopolitical crises have reignited the long-standing debate about the relevance of the BRICS group. Sceptics have interpreted the BRICS countries' lack of collective response to the US attack on Venezuela and the US–Israeli attack on Iran as evidence of their insignificance. Indeed, the absence of any joint statement or a common position, despite [Teheran's calls on the BRICS](#) to play a role in halting the military aggression, can easily be seen as confirmation that BRICS as a body is little more than a diplomatic talking shop rather than a meaningful geopolitical actor.

How, then, should BRICS be understood twenty years after the BRIC format was launched on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2006? More specifically, what might its role be in the ongoing transformation of the international order?

Recent commentary has described the grouping as »a [house of cards](#)« whose members are unable to translate their growing economic weight into collective political influence. More specifically, India's lack of support for BRICS member Iran has supposedly highlighted the hollowness of the grouping. The damning verdict is that »the bloc lets diplomats rack up frequent flyer miles, and politicians pose for pictures with other leaders. But on the world

stage it counts for next to nothing«. Others have concluded because of its inaction on Venezuela and Iran BRICS has failed to establish itself as a [coherent voice](#) for the Global South or as a driving force behind a multilateral order.

In contrast to earlier debates that included calls to »[forget the BRICS](#)« or considered it a »[geopolitical challenge](#)«, more nuanced assessments have emerged. These argue that the absence of a strong, common position on Iran or Venezuela reflects the inherent constraints of a [highly diverse grouping](#) rather than a political failure. As BRICS encompasses countries with very different strategic interests, political systems and regional priorities, the group is inherently incapable of acting collectively on major international crises. The enlargement rounds of 2024 and 2025 expanded the grouping from five to ten full [members](#) and ten partner countries, further increasing its diversity. As Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama [notes](#), enlargement has enhanced BRICS' representativeness while simultaneously importing new geopolitical tensions into the grouping. The war in the Gulf has therefore not merely confronted BRICS with an external challenge but has also become an internal one.

Although these interpretations differ in their assessments of BRICS' prospects, they share a common analytical premise: they evaluate BRICS primarily in terms of its capacity to function as a coherent geopolitical actor. Whether the

group is deemed to have failed this test or is considered to be fundamentally incapable of passing it, the same benchmark is used: its ability to formulate common positions and act collectively during international crises. In other words, geopolitical cohesion is treated as the primary measure of BRICS' effectiveness. However, as [Oliver Stuenkel](#) has noted, this benchmark is applied inconsistently. NATO and the G7 have also been fraught with significant disagreements, but these are rarely interpreted as evidence of the collapse of Western multilateral bodies. This suggests that geopolitical cohesion may not be a necessary condition for a multilateral platform such as BRICS to exert systemic influence.

This paper argues that BRICS should be seen less as a challenger to the existing international order and more as a platform through which emerging powers can contribute to its gradual reordering. BRICS is not replacing the post-1945 international order or seeking to transform it radically, but is broadening the institutional and political landscape of global governance while providing its members with more room for manoeuvre and resilience during a period of geopolitical transition. It is doing so by means of four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: functional cooperation, institutional layering, flexible geopolitical coordination, and identity-based pluralism.

Functional cooperation rather than grand strategy

The BRICS grouping has demonstrated considerable effectiveness where cooperation is technical and sector-specific rather than centred on some sort of geopolitical *grand strategy*. The group has developed close forms of policy coordination in areas in which members share practical interests despite their political differences. This functional approach is reflected in the thematic priorities of successive chairs and annual summit declarations, which exhibit remarkable continuity despite changing international circumstances.

Brazil's 2025 presidency, under the heading *»Strengthening Global South Cooperation for More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance«*, put particular emphasis on social and economic development. Priority areas included trade and investment, financial cooperation, global health, climate governance and artificial intelligence (AI). Instead of presenting BRICS as a geopolitical alliance, Brazil sought to reinforce its role as a platform for coordinating policy responses to shared development challenges. The country also actively involved civil society, organising the **BRICS People's Summit** in Rio de Janeiro.

India's 2026 presidency has continued this trajectory. Guided by the motto *»Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability«* and a *»humanity first«* approach, it has retained the Brazilian focus on development while adapting it to changing global conditions. More attention is being devoted to digital public infrastructure,

AI, economic resilience and energy security, issues that have gained particular importance following recent disruptions to global supply chains and energy markets. This continuity suggests that functional cooperation has become the principal organising logic of BRICS, providing a stable basis for collaboration despite shifting geopolitical circumstances and rotating national priorities.

Health cooperation illustrates the functional logic particularly well. During Brazil's presidency, members launched the *»BRICS Partnership for the Elimination of Socially Determined Diseases«*, aiming to strengthen South–South cooperation against diseases closely linked to poverty and inequality, including tuberculosis, malaria and leprosy. The initiative complements broader cooperation on vaccine production, pharmaceutical manufacturing, technology transfer and access to medicines. Significantly, Brazil's Ministry of Health explicitly [stressed](#) that the BRICS grouping wants the proposed cooperation not only to benefit member countries but also to help improve treatment for these diseases in multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Its objective is thus not to create an alternative global health architecture but to enhance the capacity of its members to shape existing governance arrangements from within.

Financial cooperation follows the same logic. Discussions of a BRICS currency and cross-border payment systems are often portrayed as attempts at [de-dollarisation](#). Such interpretations exaggerate both the ambitions and the capabilities of BRICS. The primary objective is not to replace the US dollar as the world's leading reserve currency or dismantle the existing international monetary system, but to reduce strategic vulnerabilities by expanding the range of available financial options for trade settlements. The [2025 Rio Declaration](#) reaffirmed support for local currency transactions and strengthening cross-border payment arrangements, while [India's 2026 chairship](#) prioritised resilient financial infrastructure and digital public infrastructure. Together, these initiatives seek to strengthen the efficiency and resilience of cross-border financial cooperation within the existing international monetary system rather than to promote monetary decoupling.

A similar pattern is evident in trade and digital governance. Rather than pursuing economic integration through a common market or preferential trade agreement, BRICS functions as a framework for coordinating national economic strategies. Intra-BRICS trade remains comparatively modest, accounting for only around 5 per cent of global trade, but members regard its untapped potential as a strategic asset. The aim is not to create a self-contained economic bloc, but to strengthen connectivity, diversify economic partnerships and reduce structural barriers to cooperation among members and partners. This logic is reflected in the BRICS Economic Partnership Strategy, which has been adopted in five-year cycles since 2020 by BRICS trade ministers and endorsed at the annual summits.

The Economic Strategy 2030 identifies trade, investment, critical minerals, infrastructure connectivity and digital economy as priority areas for cooperation. The strategy seeks to expand commercial opportunities within the existing international trading system while strengthening the competitiveness of BRICS economies. Science, technology and innovation (STI) occupy a central place in this agenda. The 2015 [Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation \(STI\)](#), signed by the ministers of the five original members, recognises technological cooperation as a driver of inclusive growth, industrial upgrading and long-term competitiveness.

The emphasis on digitalisation, innovation and technological capabilities reflects a broader shift from commodity-based cooperation towards cooperation in knowledge-intensive sectors. In this sense, economic coordination serves as an instrument for strengthening the developmental capacity of emerging economies and collective economic resilience rather than advancing a common geopolitical agenda. A revised Economic Partnership Strategy, expected in 2026, will face the challenge of extending these forms of cooperation to a much larger and more diverse membership.

These examples reveal a common pattern: BRICS as a platform expands the policy space available to its members by coordinating practical responses to shared challenges. Functional cooperation is not aimed at producing deep political integration or strategic convergence. Rather, it enables states with divergent strategic interests to cooperate where preferences overlap and tangible mutual gains can be achieved. By strengthening the collective capacities of BRICS economies, functional cooperation can gradually shift their position within global governance from, predominantly, rule-taking towards more active rule-shaping.

Institutional layering instead of institutional replacement

The significance of BRICS is often judged by its annual leaders' summits, at which diplomatic symbolism and media attention are inevitably dominant. It is therefore unsurprising that critics dismiss the grouping as [little more than a »complaints club«](#). Such assessments overlook where most BRICS cooperation actually takes place. Beyond the summits, BRICS has gradually developed a dense institutional infrastructure that enables continuous coordination across a wide range of policy areas.

Since its inception, the grouping has established around 180 cooperation mechanisms spanning finance, agriculture, education, science, health, culture, technology and security dialogue. Regular ministerial meetings in fifteen thematic areas, supported by specialised working groups and expert networks, coordinate national policies, facilitate the exchange of expertise and prepare common positions for multilateral forums. In the summer of 2026 alone, [India hosted](#) ministerial meetings on labour, education, environ-

ment, transport and energy, as well as meetings of the heads of space agencies and the BRICS Women's Ministerial Meeting. It is this institutionalisation of cooperation and not the annual leaders' meetings that constitutes one of BRICS' most important contributions to the diversification of global governance.

The New Development Bank (NDB) remains the clearest example of this institutional evolution. Since its establishment in 2015, it has financed projects in both BRICS and other Global South countries. It is focused primarily on infrastructure and sustainable development and it expands lending in local currencies. Although headquartered in Shanghai, the NDB was established on the principle of equal voting rights among its five founding members. Its rotating presidency and multinational management structure are designed to limit the dominance of any single member within the institution. The NDB has consistently [presented itself](#) as complementary to the World Bank rather than as a substitute, aiming to broaden the sources of development finance while cooperating with existing multilateral development banks.

A similar logic underpins the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which complements the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by providing a framework for short-term liquidity support to members facing balance-of-payments pressures. Together, these institutions have broadened the institutional options available to emerging economies without seeking to replace the post-war financial architecture.

But the institutional diversification extends well beyond finance. The BRICS Agricultural Research Platform supports cooperation on agricultural innovation, food security and technology transfer. The [Global Logistics Platform Office \(GLPO\)](#) in Dubai, formally endorsed at the 2024 BRICS Summit and currently being established under the leadership of DP World on behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), aims to improve logistical connectivity and facilitate trade among members and partner countries. In public health, the **BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre** launched in 2022 by China with the support of Russia and Brazil provides a permanent framework for scientific cooperation and technology exchange in public health. Similarly, the BRICS Think Tanks Council, the Academic Forum, the Business Council and the Women's Business Alliance provide permanent channels for expert exchange and business cooperation. These platforms offer continuity between annual summits and help to transpose political declarations into practical cooperation. Together, the BRICS institutions and cooperation mechanisms have created lasting organisational structures through which cooperation may become routinised and relationships among member states deepen over time.

This process is best understood as *institutional layering*. Instead of seeking to replace the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organization or other established organisations, BRICS institutions complement the existing governan

ce architecture. Their mechanisms provide additional financing options for developing economies, create new channels for knowledge exchange and increase BRICS members' capacity to pursue common objectives through functional cooperation. Reordering occurs because emerging powers create and increasingly use their own institutional mechanisms alongside established ones. BRICS is therefore not establishing an alternative world order. Instead, it is creating alternative options by means of which states can pursue their interests within the existing order.

However, the future of BRICS' institutional evolution will depend on whether this architecture can successfully accommodate the enlarged membership. Much of the existing institutional ecosystem was designed for the original five members. Integrating the new full members and partner countries into these mechanisms will therefore be a critical test of whether BRICS can translate its growing representativeness into deeper and more effective cooperation.

Flexible geopolitical coordination

BRICS faces clear limitations as a geopolitical actor. It has repeatedly failed to adopt common positions on recent conflicts. At the 2025 and 2026 Foreign Ministers' Meetings, for example, members were unable to agree on a common position regarding global developments because national interests diverged so substantially. Given its diverse membership and consensus-based decision-making, BRICS is structurally ill-suited to function as a military or security alliance capable of resolving global crises. This does not mean, however, that geopolitical coordination is entirely absent. Instead, it takes the form of selective alignment on principles of international order rather than common responses to particular geopolitical crises.

Despite the members' different foreign policy priorities, however, the 2025 Rio Declaration ultimately contained some of the strongest political language ever adopted by BRICS on the situation in the Middle East. It condemned the military strikes against Iran as a violation of international law and the United Nations (UN) Charter, albeit without explicitly identifying those responsible. The [declaration](#) also reaffirmed the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, supported the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and called for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to be placed under the administration of the Palestinian Authority. Although members could not agree on collective political action, they were able to articulate common principles to shape their shared positions in multi-lateral diplomacy.

There is considerably more convergence on the future international order than on the management of individual crises. Across successive summit declarations all BRICS members have consistently called for a stronger voice for developing countries, more representation in international financial institutions, stronger protection of state sovereignty and a more multipolar international order. The Kazan

Declaration similarly [argued](#) that the emergence of »new centres of power, policy decision-making and economic growth« should contribute to »a more equitable, just, democratic and balanced multipolar order«.

This common direction does not extend to every aspect of institutional reform, however. [Disagreements](#) over UN Security Council reform at the 2025 Foreign Ministers' Meeting showed that members continue to hold different views on the design of a reformed international order. Importantly, these differences concern the institutional pathways and distribution of influence rather than the broader objective of reform itself. BRICS has thus evolved into a forum in which emerging powers negotiate concrete proposals for global governance, moving the discussion beyond general criticisms of the status quo.

BRICS therefore does not exercise geopolitical influence by producing unified responses to geopolitical crises. Its influence lies in providing a permanent forum in which major emerging powers coordinate positions, negotiate institutional reforms and strengthen their collective bargaining capacity. Regular consultation among these states expands the range of actors participating in debates on global governance and increases the political weight of emerging powers. In this sense, BRICS contributes to the gradual reordering not through geopolitical unity but through flexible geopolitical coordination.

Identity-based pluralism

The most distinctive feature of BRICS is that it is built less on shared values than on guiding principles. Unlike the G7, BRICS does not require ideological convergence or domestic political compatibility. This enables states with different political models to participate within the same framework. Brazil's liberal democracy coexists with China's one-party state, while Russia's emphasis on traditional values contrasts with South Africa's progressive agenda. Such diversity would be difficult to sustain in a grouping based on a common identity.

Instead, BRICS is held together by a set of principles governing relations among its members: mutual respect and understanding, equality, solidarity, openness, inclusiveness, consensus-based decision-making, and closer people-to-people exchanges. The group [defines itself](#) as »an equal partnership of diverse countries with independent views«. Its cohesion therefore derives not from agreement on what members are supposed to be, but acceptance of who they are. This does not eliminate differences, but provides a framework within which such differences can coexist without preventing cooperation.

This principle is reflected not only in the group's declarations but also in the ways in which cooperation is organised. During the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran several BRICS countries — including India and South Africa — secured the safe passage of their vessels through bilateral

diplomacy tailored to their own national interests. BRICS neither coordinated these efforts nor constrained them, but rather preserved the autonomy of its members while providing a framework within which they could continue cooperating despite divergent foreign-policy choices.

Identity-based pluralism reduces the political costs of membership and broadens BRICS' appeal among countries seeking more strategic flexibility. This helps to explain why states with bilateral issues — such as China and India, Egypt and Ethiopia, or Iran and UAE — continue to engage through BRICS. The platform can facilitate rapprochement, as demonstrated by the China–India leaders' [meeting](#) on the margins of the 2024 BRICS summit after a period of diplomatic chill. But it has also proved resilient enough to accommodate the sharp deterioration of relations [between Iran and UAE](#) in 2026. In either case, BRICS showed its value in maintaining channels of communication among states that might otherwise have little incentive to engage with one another directly.

The reordering effect of identity-based pluralism lies in its striving to institutionalise diversity as a feature rather than an obstacle of multilateral cooperation. BRICS represents a sovereignty-centred and pragmatic model in which accommodation and consensus on guiding principles provide the basis for cooperation among diverse actors. This approach reflects a broader trend among emerging middle powers seeking more room for manoeuvre amid great-power competition and global fragmentation. Its long-term sustainability will depend on whether BRICS can maintain the balance between expanding diversity and preserving sufficient cohesion to achieve practical outcomes.

Conclusion

After two decades, BRICS is neither evolving into a geopolitical alliance nor collapsing under the weight of its internal diversity. Its resilience stems from a different logic of international cooperation. Rather than seeking to establish a common position on all major geopolitical issues, the platform allows its members to coordinate selectively, expand their policy options and articulate joint demands for more influence in global governance. Moreover, since its expansion it has become an informal coalition of middle powers of the Global South backed by the economic and political clout of China and Russia.

Nevertheless, China and Russia do not dominate BRICS by exercising coercive power, nor are they likely to succeed in transforming it into an outright anti-Western bloc. Any such attempt would undermine the very flexibility that makes the platform attractive to its other members. Beijing and Moscow do exercise substantial influence, but the diversity of the group imposes significant constraints on both their ability and their incentives to impose a common geopolitical agenda.

BRICS has no oath of allegiance and no expectation of systematic foreign-policy alignment. Its members retain considerable freedom to pursue their own interests and maintain relationships with competing powers. At most, a limited geopolitical consensus has emerged around resisting policies perceived as explicitly directed against China or Russia. This does not, however, translate into strategic alignment with either power.

This logic is particularly relevant to the European Union, whose approach to partnerships has often rested on an implicit proposition: deeper cooperation comes with political expectations, whether in terms of strategic alignment, political models or shared values. BRICS points to an alternative model, in which states seek the benefits of multilateral cooperation while preserving room for manoeuvre.

Identity-based pluralism is arguably the most distinctive feature of BRICS. Whereas many Western-led institutions emphasise cohesion through political convergence or binding commitments, BRICS seeks to make cooperation possible while allowing states with different political systems, interests and worldviews to coordinate around shared objectives.

Such pluralism does not mean that BRICS is a platform without influence, however. Through *functional cooperation, institutional layering and flexible geopolitical coordination*, BRICS provides its members with a set of instruments with which to navigate a fragmented international environment. BRICS is not aiming to resolve global disorder but helping to organise it by introducing a certain amount of structure and creating additional channels through which states can cooperate without requiring comprehensive strategic consensus.

This function of BRICS may become even more important at a time when traditional multilateral institutions are constrained by geopolitical confrontation and the UN is facing a deep [financial crisis](#). Confidence in established international leadership has also been weakened by growing strategic uncertainty, including the unpredictable policy of the current US administration and the EU's struggle to define its role in the changing global order. The growing appeal of BRICS — and, in a different institutional form, the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation \(SCO\)](#) — points towards a broader shift. The future of multilateralism may be shaped less by blocs of like-minded states than by diverse coalitions of countries willing to work together in areas in which their interests overlap.

Whether BRICS ultimately succeeds will therefore depend less on its ability to speak with one voice during every geopolitical crisis than on its capacity to deliver practical outcomes, strengthen the collective agency of middle powers and promote a more plural distribution of power. If it can expand its institutional capacity while preserving the flexibility that has enabled its diverse membership to cooperate, BRICS could become an influential platform through

which emerging powers help shape the ongoing reordering of global governance.

This has important practical implications for the EU. If it wants to cooperate more deeply and constructively with the Global South, the EU may need to reconsider the assumption that effective partnership requires political convergence. The lesson of BRICS is uncomfortable but potentially useful: in an increasingly plural international order, flexibility may become a greater source of cohesion than shared ideology.

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