

EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 364

– NOVEMBER 2024 –

Why the BRICS Summit in Kazan should be a Wake-up Call for the EU

Reinhold Brender

This policy brief examines the growing influence of the BRICS in a multipolar world, as highlighted by their recent summit in Kazan, Russia, and the challenges to effective global multilateralism. Originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and later South Africa, the BRICS have recently expanded to include Ethiopia, Egypt, the UAE, and Iran. All BRICS members seek to reshape global governance to provide a greater voice for the Global South and strengthen South-South cooperation. However, internal divisions persist: China, Russia, and Iran view the BRICS as a platform to counter Western influence, while India, Brazil, and South Africa pursue ‘multi-alignment’ to diversify their global partnerships. This brief argues that, given the urgency of pressing global challenges, the EU should take the Kazan Summit as a wake-up call to develop and implement a strategy for engaging the Global South in the much-needed reform of global multilateralism. This effort is essential despite the reelection of Donald Trump as US President.

CONTEXT

The shift toward a multipolar world, marked by geostrategic rivalries and diverging interests, comes at a cost. The weakness of global multilateral cooperation has created fertile ground for the rise of “minilateralism”—cooperation among small groups of countries targeting specific challenges. These partnerships are often seen as more effective than global cooperation for certain issues, and they build mutual trust. However, minilateral cooperation falls short on global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence, and

issues of war and peace. Ultimately, global cooperation through the UN remains indispensable. Minilateralism is valuable only when it complements and supports global multilateral efforts, not when it undermines them.

This dynamic poses a significant challenge for the EU in the context of the growing influence of the BRICS, given the group’s assertive non- or even anti-Western stance. The BRICS represent a model of minilateral cooperation spanning several continents. Initially known by the acronym BRIC, the group—comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China—was first expanded to include South Africa and has since been referred to as BRICS. Over the past decade and a half, the BRICS have consistently sought a greater say for the Global South in global governance, positioning themselves as its champions in an increasingly multipolar world.¹

The widely used term Global South encompasses politically, economically and culturally diverse countries across continents, including many former colonies and developing countries. According to a widely accepted definition shared here, the Global South includes all 134 members of the UN Group of 77 (G77) plus China, representing more than two-thirds of all UN members. Others interpret the term more narrowly or question its use altogether.² Among its most pressing concerns, the Global South seeks greater representation in global governance institutions and prioritises the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aims to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all by 2030.

THE KAZAN SUMMIT AND BRICS EXPANSION

The BRICS Summit, held in Kazan, Russia, on 22-24 October 2024 under the theme “Strengthening Multilateralism for Equitable Global Development and Security”, marked a notable diplomatic success for President Putin. The event projected a message of Russia’s sustained influence and robust partnerships despite Western sanctions. Alongside Chinese President Xi, Putin presented himself as an architect of last year’s decision on further BRICS expansion, which brought in Ethiopia, Egypt, the UAE, and Iran. In Kazan, this expanded group introduced itself to the world, with Putin noting the interest of 30 additional states in deepening ties with BRICS.³

According to Putin, 35 countries and six international organisations took part, making the summit the most significant international event he attended since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. All BRICS leaders were present (with Brazil’s President joining virtually due to injury), as was UN Secretary-General Guterres.

In his speech, Guterres urged the BRICS to support the Pact for the Future adopted at a recent UN summit to strengthen global multilateralism. He called for urgent action on development finance, climate, technology and peace, highlighting the wars in Gaza, Lebanon, Ukraine and Sudan. On Ukraine, he stressed the importance of a “just peace in line with the UN Charter, international law and General Assembly resolutions” and, in a bilateral meeting with Putin, recalled the illegality of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Guterres’ presence in Kazan drew criticism from Ukraine and others. Yet it must be acknowledged that he was in a no-win situation, as it was to be expected that he would be criticised for going to Kazan and criticised for not going.⁴

The Kazan Summit included non-BRICS countries from the Global South—Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, the Caucasus and Central Asia—in an outreach event, underscoring its focus on non-Western engagement in the absence of Western countries.

In their Summit declaration, the BRICS called for reconfiguring the architecture of international relations, including reforming the UN Security Council, to better align with today’s multipolar reality. This move is meant to enhance the voice of the Global South in global governance. Simultaneously, the members reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and international law, as enshrined in the UN Charter.

The declaration devotes eight paragraphs to conflicts in the Middle East, with criticism of Israel centred on developments in Gaza and southern Lebanon. In contrast, only one paragraph addresses the situation in Ukraine. Here, the BRICS members refer to their national positions in fora such as the UN Security Council, emphasising the importance of the UN Charter but refraining from explicitly endorsing Russia’s stance. All BRICS members express deep concern over “illegal coercive measures”, including sanctions. They also call for a fairer international financial system and advocate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵

In a speech addressing the other BRICS leaders, President Putin interpreted the summit as a sign of a changing global order, suggesting that in today’s multipolar world, a “global majority”—comprising Russia, China and the Global South—stands in opposition to a declining West.⁶ Indeed, the BRICS symbolise a multipolar world in which already stronger non-Western countries continue to gain political and economic influence, reducing Western dominance. The enlarged BRICS now account for about 45% of the world’s population and 35% of global GDP (PPP), while the G7 represents about 10% of the population and 30% of GDP (PPP).⁷

TENSIONS WITHIN THE BRICS

Tensions within the BRICS stem from differing geopolitical orientations as well as conflicts between members of the group. China is keen to dislodge US dominance in the Indo-Pacific as it sees regional supremacy as key to its ambition to become a global power. Ultimately, it views itself as a rival to the US, seeking leadership in a multipolar world through economic and technological means rather

than military build-up alone. Russia, driven by its desire to reassert great power status, seeks to revise a global order that it perceives as unfavourable to its interests, prioritising control over its neighbourhood as vital to its security and identity and resisting NATO expansion and Western influence there. Iran, similarly anti-Western, finds its interests aligned with both China and Russia.

In contrast, India, Brazil, Egypt, and the UAE see the BRICS as a means to broaden strategic options in a multipolar world. Rather than adopting an anti-Western stance, they are open to cooperation with the West when it serves their interests, pursuing “multi-alignment” instead of strict alignment with one country or non-alignment. For them, the BRICS offer unique opportunities for cooperation within the Global South and privileged access to the Chinese leadership—a notable benefit given China’s dominant political and economic influence.

Tensions within the BRICS also stem from the competition among China, India, and Russia for leadership of the Global South.⁸ India and China are locked in a border dispute in the Himalaya region, which Presidents Xi and Modi discussed at a meeting in Kazan in a sign of easing tensions. There are strains between Egypt and Ethiopia over differing interests in the water supply from the Nile. These conflicts come on top of the differences in the political and economic systems of the BRICS countries. India, Brazil and South Africa are democracies, albeit with flaws, while the other countries are variants of autocracy. Russia, Brazil, Iran and the UAE have common interests as energy exporters, whereas China, India and South Africa depend on energy imports. The summit’s outcome, along with its 30 accompanying declarations, underscores the BRICS’s dual goals: reshaping global governance and fostering South-South cooperation. The final documents outline an ambitious cooperative agenda spanning multiple policy areas, including foreign policy, economics, energy, transport, education, technology, sports, and youth.⁹

To date, the BRICS have struggled to translate their declarations into action, as aligning the diverse interests of their members has proven challenging. The recent

expansion further complicates decision-making as new members bring their own priorities. Like the G7 and G20, the BRICS rely on voluntary cooperation rather than a formal organisational structure. With no founding treaty, binding procedures or centralised administration, cooperation depends largely on the political will of the members.

The group is working to deepen trade relations and reduce dependence on the Western financial system by lowering trade barriers and increasing the use of national currencies. Social and cultural exchanges are also expanding, including cooperation in education, research and tourism. But the BRICS’ achievements remain modest: the New Development Bank plans to lend \$5 billion this year—small compared to the World Bank’s nearly \$73 billion¹⁰—and their influence on global governance remains limited.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

Despite the limitations of the BRICS, the pivot of many countries in the Global South towards this group should be a catalyst for the EU to adjust its foreign policy. The EU needs to rethink its approach to the Global South beyond the BRICS, seeking common ground on shared challenges such as climate change and economic inequality. In doing so, it can hope to strengthen global multilateral cooperation. Kazan should be a wake-up call.

There are three reasons for this: First, the September UN Summit for the Future failed to lay the groundwork for greater participation in global governance that the Global South rightly demands. The UN Secretary-General’s hope that this summit would lead to a breakthrough and put global multilateral cooperation on a new footing did not materialise. The UN and other institutions still reflect a post-World War II power balance rather than the realities of today and tomorrow. This state of affairs is not in the West’s interest, as effective global governance depends on the support and trust of all countries. Without meaningful reform, challenges from the Global South risk further weakening and delegitimising these institutions, making genuine reform more urgent than ever.¹¹

Second, global multilateralism will only see revival if it is sufficiently inclusive. Addressing today's global challenges requires the West's cooperation with the Global South and the East, including China and Russia. New approaches are needed to ensure that global cooperation is effective even in times of geopolitical rivalry.

Third, the EU and the West should not leave the task of winning over the Global South on multilateral reform to China and Russia, which approach it with an anti-Western stance. Instead, the EU itself, alongside Western partners, should lead a movement for reforming multilateralism by building a broad coalition with the Global South while also encouraging the participation of China and Russia.

EU PRIORITIES AND THE US ELECTION

In its Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, adopted by the European Council in June, the EU committed to "remain a driving force behind the multilateralism and the global rules-based international order" as well as to "take the lead in addressing global challenges, championing international law and institutions, fair global governance, inclusive multilateralism and sustainable growth and development".¹²

Efforts to reinvigorate global multilateral cooperation must be a crucial part of the drive to deliver on this commitment. They must involve as many countries in the Global South as possible, including the BRICS, in addition to like-minded Western partners. It helps that the BRICS, like all countries of the Global South, continue to see the UN as the core of global governance. The UN's legitimacy and convening power are unparalleled. It also helps that prominent BRICS members, like others, are open to cooperation with the West when it suits their interests.

And yet, the reelection of Donald Trump as US President brings considerable uncertainty to the EU's multilateral agenda. With an *America First* approach potentially leading to decreased US involvement in international organizations and a preference for bilateral agreements, the EU may face new challenges in coalition-building efforts with the Global South, including the BRICS.

To navigate this shift, the EU must take a proactive stance, reinforcing alliances that remain committed to multilateralism and promoting global governance reform in collaboration with like-minded partners. The EU should, therefore, deepen its alliances within the G7 and beyond, building multilateral frameworks that can endure despite changes in US policy.

Trump's reelection could divide the West, with some countries remaining committed to multilateralism and others showing less commitment or resistance. Reforming multilateralism will thus require the EU and likeminded Western partners to engage not only with the US but also with other Western countries less aligned with this goal, as well as with the Global South, to advance global governance reform. This dual approach will demand sustained, long-term efforts and face inevitable challenges. Yet, it is essential to ensure that multilateralism remains viable and capable of addressing today's and tomorrow's pressing issues.

At the same time, the EU and its Western partners must urgently implement reforms to enhance their collective ability to address global challenges, such as climate change, which require immediate, coordinated action regardless of political shifts in the US. While awaiting the new US administration's stance on multilateralism, the EU should proactively strengthen its alliances with countries committed to upholding multilateral values.

In parallel there should be outreach to the Global South, including the BRICS. The EU has no formal relations with the BRICS as a group. However, it has diplomatic relations with each of the members, except Iran. It has designated Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and, more recently, Egypt as strategic partners, but engagement with Russia, China and Iran is challenging because of the politics of these countries. Nevertheless, the EU is well-placed to work with the BRICS countries and beyond on global governance reform. It can build on its own experience as a multilateral project and decades of strong political, economic and development partnerships worldwide.



THE NEED FOR A STRATEGY

The EU should engage in a specific, concerted and determined effort to revive multilateralism at the global level. Collaborative work with interested countries on the UN Sustainable Development Goals could provide a unifying framework and underscore mutual benefits.

To accomplish this, the EU must develop a holistic strategy for working with other countries on multilateral reform within a multipolar world. A vision that promotes mutual understanding and cooperation with the Global South must be a core part. This approach will require thoroughly redefining Europe's role on the global stage in a first step. The 2016 Global Strategy is no longer relevant due to the significant geopolitical changes over recent years, as well as the likely seismic shift the new U.S. administration's *America First* approach will bring.¹³

However, collaboration with the Global South presents a complex challenge for the EU, as it must balance core values, such as human rights and democracy, with the practical need to secure effective partnerships. Long-standing accusations of double standards—particularly regarding the EU's contrasting responses to the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza—have further strained its relations with the Global South. To build trust, it is essential for the EU to clarify how it intends to uphold its values as it navigates today's complex global landscape. While the EU has considerable experience engaging with countries that do not fully align with its values, its concept of "principled pragmatism" for such situations requires greater clarity. Reforming global governance faces many challenges and requires exceptional staying power, but it is a must.

Dr Reinhold Brender is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute. He is a former EU official with extensive experience in EU external relations, covering the European Neighbourhood (East and South), transatlantic relations and the Indo-Pacific region.



Endnotes

- 1 Stewart Patrick, 'BRICS Expansion, the G20, and the Future of World Order', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 October 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/brics-summit-emerging-middle-powers-g7-g20?lang=en>; Alexander Gabuev and Oliver Stuenkel, 'The Battle for the BRICS', Foreign Affairs, 24 September 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics>; Amelia Nierenberg, 'Understanding the BRICS Summit', The New York Times, 22 October 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/21/world/brics-summit-countries-goals.html>; Marc Jütten, 'Expansion of BRICS: A Quest for Greater Global Influence?', European Parliament, March 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)760368](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)760368); Thorsten Benner and Oliver Stuenkel, 'BRICS, Format Der Vielen Optionen', Internationale Politik, Oktober 2023, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/brics-format-der-vielen-optionen>.
- 2 Elisa Díaz Gras, 'The Global South: What's in a Name?', Brussels Institute for Geopolitics, 3 October 2024, <https://big-europe.eu/publications/2024-10-03-the-global-south-what-s-in-a-name>; C. Raja Mohan, 'Is There Such a Thing as the Global South?', Foreign Policy, 9 December 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/09/global-south-definition-meaning-countries-development/>.
- 3 'Russian 2024 BRICS Chairmanship', BRICS Russia 2024, 22 October 2024, <https://brics-russia2024.ru/en/>.
- 4 'Secretary-General's Remarks to the 16th BRICS Summit [as Delivered]', United Nations Secretary General, 24 October 2024, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-10-24/secretary-generals-remarks-the-16th-brics-summit-delivered>; 'UN Chief Tells President Putin Russian Invasion Violates UN Charter', United Nations - UN News, 25 October 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1156161>; Richard Gowan, 'For Guterres, the BRICS Summit Was a No-Win Situation', World Politics Review (blog), 31 October 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/un-guterres-brics-putin/>.
- 5 'XVI BRICS Summit - Kazan Declaration: Strengthening Development for Just Global Development and Security', BRICS Russia 2024, 23 October 2024, https://cdn.brics-russia2024.ru/upload/docs/Kazan_Declaration_FINAL.pdf?1729693488349783.
- 6 'Speech at the Expanded Meeting of the BRICS Summit', President of Russia, 23 October 2024.
- 7 'BRICS vs G7 GDP as a Share of World Total 2024', Statista, 15 July 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1412425/gdp-ppp-share-world-gdp-g7-brics/>.
- 8 Ishaan Tharoor, 'The Growing Tension within the BRICS', Washington Post, 23 October 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/23/brics-summit-russia-china/>.
- 9 'Kazan Summit Documents', BRICS Russia 2024, 22 October 2024, <https://brics-russia2024.ru/en/docs/>.
- 10 Mark John and Libby George, 'BRICS Gathers Pace as Shared Grievances with West Fuel Alliance', Reuters, 25 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/spurred-by-shared-grievances-brics-gathers-pace-2024-10-24/>.
- 11 Reinhold Brender, 'The UN Pact for the Future: A Modest Boost for Global Governance Reform', Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 15 October 2024, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-un-pact-for-the-future-a-modest-boost-for-global-governance-reform/>.
- 12 'Strategic Agenda 2024-2029', Council of the European Union, n.d., <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>.
- 13 Peter D. Feaver, 'How Trump Will Change the World', Foreign Affairs, 6 November 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-trump-will-change-world>.





The opinions expressed in this Publication are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute, November 2024

© Author(s), November 2024