

BRICS+: an Odd Family of (un)Likely Frenemies

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On June 13, 2025, the government of Brazil, in its capacity as pro tempore BRICS(+) Chair, announced the formal admission of Vietnam as a partner country of the group. With this, Vietnam became the tenth BRICS+ partner country, after Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan had obtained this status in 2024. This Policy Brief aims to assess the significance of the BRICS+ framework as a whole, with particular emphasis on the role and positioning of Vietnam's partnership within the context of the increasingly dynamic and contested geopolitical landscape that the European Union (EU) is presently faced with.

FROM BRIC, TO BRICS, TO BRICS+, TO BRICS+ PARTNER COUNTRIES

The acronym 'BRIC' (Brazil, Russia, India, China) was first coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001 in an article titled *Building Better Global Economic BRICs*.¹ The article referred to Brazil, Russia, India, and China as the most significant emerging economic powers, suggesting they would have a major impact on global economic dynamics, particularly challenging the dominance of the G7 economies. The first BRIC summit in 2009 was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, and marked the beginning of formal diplomatic coordination and joint declarations on global issues. With Beijing's support, South Africa joined the group, and the 2011 summit in Sanya, China, marked the official formation of BRICS.² At the August 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, membership of six new member countries was

agreed upon—formalized through a “plus” (+)—effective from January 1, 2024: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.³ In the final days of Russia's 2024 BRICS presidency, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan were announced as ‘partner countries’ of the group, effective January 1, 2025.⁴ Finally, on June 13, 2025, the government of Brazil, in its capacity as pro tempore BRICS Chair, announced the formal admission of Vietnam as the tenth partner country of the group.⁵

Although Argentina backed out of its plan to join BRICS+ after Javier Milei was elected President,⁶ it is worth noting that new partner countries Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are also members of the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ (SCO), the first institute of global governance created on Chinese initiative in 2001. This, and the fact that, in 2024, BRICS+ offered Türkiye, a NATO member state, partner country status,⁷ points to two important developments on the global scene: the increasing geopolitical and geo-economic clout of China, and the increasing influence of ‘sovereign internationalism’—China's peculiar view on global order—among the countries of the Global South.⁸

Indeed, China's geopolitical weight is related to its economic weight within the BRICS+ group. In 2024, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchase Power Parity (PPP) amounted to 41.304 trillion US dollars, followed by India (20.547 trillion US dollars), Russia (7.582 trillion US dollars), Brazil (5.479 trillion US dollars), Egypt (1.971 trillion US dollars), Saudi Arabia (1.862 trillion US dollars), Iran (1.746 trillion US dollars), South Africa (870 billion US dollars), the United Arab Emirates (791.3 billion US dollars), and

Ethiopia (380 billion US dollars).⁹ Taken together, IMF data shows that, in terms of their share of the global economy, the BRICS accounted for 40% of the world's economy in 2024, while the developed countries of the G7 accounted for approximately 28%.¹⁰ While the developed world still maintains a (roughly similar) lead in nominal terms, the BRICS+ group is also narrowing the gap in that regard.

It is, in retrospect, also important to recall that (1) Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Thailand, Türkiye, and representatives of (North) Vietnam were among the 29 countries present at the historic anti-imperialist and decolonial Bandung conference held in April 1955; and, (2) that China's so-called 'five principles of peaceful co-existence' (mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of other nation states, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal matters of other nation states, equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence) were fully integrated into the principles that were accepted at this conference. These 'five principles' have arguably been the guideline for China's foreign policy ever since. They are an important element of the country's 'sovereign internationalism' (also referred to as 'neo-sovereignism'), a view on world order that is characterized by (1) self-affirmation, understood as that rising powers have to reconquer their sovereignty after a colonial or a 'paracolonial' moment, made of capitulations, territorial concessions or tutorship; (2) self-protection, understood as referring to a foreign policy that is based on the principle of territorial integrity, rather than on extensive global diplomacy; (3) new mutualism, fuelling a significant solidarity among rising powers; (4) anti-hierarchy assertion; (5) protest, understood as attempting to make audible the voices of states that have so far remained marginalized; and, (6) adherence to firm rules for containing existing powers, while at the same time advocating flexible norms in order to protect the independence of every member of the international community.¹¹ Sovereign internationalism holds particular appeal for countries of the Global South, especially for those BRICS+ members that prioritize the preservation of their sovereignty while acknowledging the benefits of a multipolar (i.e., non-Western-led) international order. In this regard, the spirit of Bandung appears to be still present in BRICS+.

BRICS+: MULTIPOLAR OR ANTI-WESTERN?

The attendance of UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the BRICS meeting during October 2024 in Kazan was highly significant. At the UN Summit's Action Days of September 2024 in New York, Guterres had already spoken in favor for reform of the UN and related institutions in the direction of the multipolar world that BRICS (and Bandung in the past) seemed to propose, stating that "We need multilateralism that is more inclusive, more effective and more networked—with stronger links between international institutions and with the people. That means greater representation of developing countries [...] reform of the outdated United Nations Security Council—to make it more effective but also more representative of what the world is today; reform of our international financial institutions—so that they supercharge resources for sustainable development and for climate action; reform of the rules governing outer space—currently a chaotic free-for-all; and reform how we respond to complex global shocks and work together on peace and security."¹²

This likely also aligns with what Jim O'Neill himself envisioned when he called in 2001 for the original BRIC "to [be] brought into the centre of global policy making." And yet, O'Neill more recently equally proposed that the loose coherence of the member and partner states of the grouping could spell trouble in the future concerning bilateral and multilateral cooperation.¹³ Much more than, for example, the G7, a comparison of the BRICS+ (partner) countries in 2025 reveals significant differences across several dimensions. They diverge not only in the functioning of their democratic institutions (Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and Malaysia, for example, are at least partial democracies with considerable freedom of speech, while some other members are fully authoritarian), but also in their interpretations of human rights (while same-sex marriage became legal in Thailand on January 23, 2025, homosexuality remains punishable by death in Uganda). Additionally, their relationships with China vary widely: India, for instance, currently harbors widespread anti-Chinese sentiment and is likely to continue blocking membership for one of Beijing's closest allies, Pakistan.

However, despite these contradictions, it may precisely be the nature of BRICS+ as a dialogue platform and non-binding framework of cooperation, that enables these countries to, in a spirit of ‘sovereign internationalism,’ adhere to their national sovereignty, while simultaneously using the BRICS+ platform to better negotiate their positions within the existing Western-led world order.

UNLIMITED RUSSIAN-CHINESE FRIENDSHIP?

The multipolar world order envisioned by Beijing for BRICS+ also does not necessarily tally with Moscow’s apparent desire for a purely anti-Western bloc, as evidenced by the omission of several of Putin’s talking points in Kazan’s joint declaration. For instance, Putin’s strong push for full de-dollarization—clearly aimed at evading and mitigating Western sanctions on Russia—was softened to vague references about “expanding local currency financing and strengthening innovation in investment and financing tools.”¹⁴ This caution is particularly relevant for BRICS+ members like India and Brazil (a member of the International Criminal Court that issued an arrest warrant for Putin)¹⁵ which maintain close(r) ties with the West, making such discourse potentially concerning for them. Xi Jinping’s address in Kazan did not seem to fully endorse Moscow’s desired aggressive initiatives either,¹⁶ further showcasing differing perspectives between China and Russia on the future of organizations like BRICS+.

Beyond policy statements, the strategic priorities of Beijing and Moscow also diverge in more fundamental ways. China views BRICS+ primarily as a platform to expand its global economic influence and legitimize multipolar governance structures without openly (further) antagonizing Western powers as it remains deeply integrated into their trade and finance networks. Beijing therefore seeks to prevent economic decoupling at all costs, especially with the EU. In contrast, Russia, increasingly isolated due to sanctions and its persisting war of aggression against Ukraine, would like to shape BRICS+ into a geopolitical counterweight to the West, with a much stronger emphasis on creating a multinational foundation for an enduring political confrontation. These underlying tensions between Moscow and Beijing

prevent the realization of the “no-limits friendship” that the two proudly and frequently invoked shortly before (but considerably less prominently since) the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷ Whether even the current “limited friendship” can withstand a post-Putin Russia and a post-Xi China equally remains to be seen.

WHAT ABOUT ‘NEW PARTNER COUNTRY’ VIETNAM?

Vietnam can be seen as rather emblematic for the limitations of BRICS+ and its partner countries. Hanoi’s pragmatic and non-aligned foreign policy rooted in its “Bamboo Diplomacy,” originating in a 2016 speech by the country’s former leader Nguyen Phu Trong,¹⁸ is representative of how most emerging powers remain wary of embracing rigid bloc politics, particularly those framed in overt opposition to the West. In spite of its shared communist system with China and deep historical ties to Russia (and despite maintaining ‘neutrality with Russian sympathies’ regarding the war in Ukraine), Vietnam has continued to chart an independent course that avoids permanent alignment with any great power.

Hanoi’s recent outreaches to both Beijing and Washington demonstrate its commitment to maintaining strategic flexibility. While Vietnamese leader To Lam’s inaugural state visit to Beijing in 2024 symbolized continuity in the countries’ bilateral relations, his rapid follow-up trip to the US alongside an expanding network of comprehensive strategic partnerships with a diverse array of countries like Japan, India, South Korea, and even (former colonial overlord) France, signals a pragmatic diversification of cooperations. Hanoi’s careful navigation of great power rivalry displays a key challenge for both Moscow and Beijing. Unlike Russia, which has a small subset of close allies founded on bloc confrontation (Moscow’s deepening ties with North Korea and the member states of the newly formed anti-Western Alliance of Sahel States are rather representative of this approach), China does appear to recognize more prominently that winning (enduring) influence among emerging economies (also) requires flexibility, economic-centered incentives, and avoidance of bloc confrontation. Yet even China’s somewhat ‘softer’ approach to the Global South, marked, for instance, by a

cordial visit of Xi Jinping to Southeast Asia in April 2025 focused on economic collaboration, has also already shown its limits. In the Vietnamese case this is evident in persistent skepticism toward Beijing's maritime ambitions in the South China Sea ("East Sea" for Hanoi), fears of Chinese economic dominance, and deep-rooted historical wariness of Chinese intentions shaped by centuries of conflict pejoratively referred to as "Northern Belonging" by many Vietnamese.¹⁹

In this sense, Vietnam offers a preview of what multipolarity might look like in practice: a world of overlapping non-exclusive partnerships, limited alignments (even when ideologies seemingly overlap, like in the Sino-Vietnamese case), and highly transactional diplomacy. For BRICS (be it with or without its 'plus' and the new partner states) to succeed as more than just a symbolic counterweight to Western institutions, it would need to accommodate this fluidity, which is something Russia's (and, as shown through the Vietnamese example, sometimes even China's) confrontational posture could ultimately undermine. The continued expansion of the initiative may therefore represent either a strength or a vulnerability depending on the future strategic intentions of its two most influential members.

FINALLY THEN, WHAT ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION?

The continued evolution of BRICS+, both in terms of membership and (lack of) strategic intent, highlights the increasing complexity of today's global order. Rather than forming a coherent counter-bloc to Western institutions, BRICS+ appears to be emerging as a loose constellation of states united more by a desire for greater agency within international institutions than by shared ideology or iconoclastic policy objectives. In this environment, the EU must adapt to the reality that rising and middle powers increasingly seek flexible, transactional, and sovereign-aligned forms of cooperation. Rather than interpreting BRICS+ as a purely adversarial project, engaging with its members, especially those like Vietnam that retain strong ties to both Western and non-Western actors, offers a chance to reframe global engagement in more inclusive

and multipolar terms. By doing this, it could also steer Beijing away from siding fully with Moscow's desired confrontational posture.

In the context of evolving multilateral frameworks and dialogue platforms such as BRICS+, it becomes increasingly important for the EU to acknowledge that, although it regards its normative values (exemplified by democracy, the rule of law, and human rights) as universal and rightly expects its member states to conform to this logic of appropriateness, this universality is not inherently recognized or accepted in the international arena under the current backdrop of global democratic backsliding. In light of this (sobering) reality and the increasing weaponization of interdependencies, it is becoming ever more crucial for the EU to demonstrate leadership in its international diplomacy by actively pursuing a more constructive and inclusive dialogue with BRICS+ states and the Global South. Such a stance would be fully in line with the Union's foreign policy foundation of principled pragmatism; one that safeguards core values while engaging pragmatically with an increasingly diverse and multipolar world.

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