

BRICS+: An Embryonic Challenge or a Latent Threat to the US-led Order?

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Summary

This paper assesses the evolving role of BRICS+ amid growing global uncertainty and recent developments such as Chinese leader Xi Jinping's absence from the BRICS Rio summit and renewed United States (US) tariff threats. It argues that BRICS+ remains constrained by internal divisions, divergent national interests and limited progress on de-dollarisation, cited by US President Donald Trump as a threat to American dominance in global trade. Far from being an imminent challenger to Western dominance, the group's heterogeneity and competing priorities, particularly between China and India, undermine prospects for unified action. Nevertheless, its economic weight and advocacy for a multipolar world mark BRICS+ as a latent, if not incoherent, force prompting debate about the future of global governance and Western dominance.

Introduction

The chaotic international situation and the increasing uncertainty of the future world order re-energised debates over the future of global governance, including on the role of the BRICS+, a heterogeneous group of non-western countries originally consisting of Brazil, India, China and South Africa and recently expanded. Recent developments – notably Chinese President Xi Jinping's absence from the Rio's BRICS+ summit in July 2025 and United States (US) President Donald Trump's threat of punitive tariffs on the BRICS countries seeking to undermine the role of the US dollar in international trade – have brought renewed scrutiny to the group's internal cohesion and external ambitions. This brief argues that BRICS+ does not represent an imminent challenge to Western dominance as it remains a heterogeneous coalition whose influence is constrained by internal contradictions.

Trump's Tariff Threats: Rhetoric or Real Response?

Trump's declaration of potential tariffs on 'un-American' BRICS countries if they insist on finding ways to undermine the role of the US dollar in international trade is emblematic of his negotiating style rather than a uniquely targeted response to BRICS+. As seen in prior instances – from trade spats with China to threats directed at North Atlantic Treaty Organisation allies and other allies – tariff threats have become a prelude to negotiation rather than a genuine policy shift. In fact, the drive by BRICS+ to de-dollarise international trade remains at an embryonic stage. Most cross-border transactions among the BRICS members are still settled in US dollars, and attempts to build alternatives (such as the BRICS Cross-Border Payment System) are nascent and far from supplanting established mechanisms like the [SWIFT](#), even though they are [useful tools](#) for countries (such as Russia and Iran) hit by sanctions. Thus, the de-dollarisation rhetoric serves more as a signal of

intent than an imminent threat to dollar hegemony. Trump's vocal opposition, therefore, is less indicative of the seriousness of the threat and more reflective of his transactional approach to foreign policy negotiations.

Is BRICS+ Really Anti-Western? Moderation and Multiplicity within the Bloc

Also, the perception of BRICS+ as an overtly anti-Western bloc does not withstand closer scrutiny. While Russia and China have indeed promoted a more assertive posture towards the West, [the group's agenda](#) is moderated by the more pragmatic stances of India and Brazil, as well as new [members of other partner countries](#) such as Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates. India, in particular, has consistently pushed back against attempts to turn BRICS into an anti-Western platform, emphasising strategic autonomy and multilateral cooperation. Brazil, under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as well as India under Narendra Modi, have positioned themselves as a bridge between the Global South and the West, advocating for a more inclusive global order rather than outright confrontation. This balancing act was evident at the [Rio summit](#) as well as at virtually all recent BRICS gatherings, where joint statements avoided direct attacks on Western institutions and focused instead on developmental finance, infrastructure and climate action.

Moreover, India's growing security partnership with the US and its participation in the Quadrilateral Security dialogue, alongside its economic and security ties with Israel, stand in contrast to the positions of new BRICS+ members such as Iran. This divergence demonstrates the bloc's reluctance – and perhaps inability – to craft a unified anti-Western strategy. The recent inclusion of the Middle Eastern and African states, each with its own external alignments, further dilutes any singular anti-Western orientation.

BRICS+: Heterogeneity, Contradictions and Latent Challenges

In fact, the [internal dynamics of BRICS+](#) are defined as much by rivalry as by solidarity. The coalition is marked by deep-seated contradictions. To name just the most glaring one, China and India remain locked in a geopolitical contest – from border disputes to competition for leadership in the Global South. India's scepticism towards the Belt and Road Initiative and its measured approach to BRICS expansion clash with China's ambitions for greater influence. In other words, while both see BRICS+ as a useful foreign policy tool to push for a more multilateral world order, India's fears that an expansion of the influence of the group will translate into greater influence of Beijing on world affairs.

Economic disparities persist as well – China dominates intra-BRICS trade, while India, Brazil and South Africa worry about economic asymmetries and possible subordination. The expansion of BRICS+ to include major oil producers brings new opportunities but also new sources of divergence, such as conflicting interests in energy markets and regional politics. As a result, the group's communiqués are typically the product of protracted negotiations, often papering over fundamental disagreements in favour of lowest-common-denominator consensus.

Yet, despite – or perhaps because of – its heterogeneity, BRICS+ remains a latent challenge to the US-led order. Its sheer economic and demographic weight is undeniable: accounting for over 40 per cent of the world’s population and more than a third of global GDP, BRICS+ possesses the scale to influence international norms and institutions, even if its agenda is divided. The push for reforms at the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and United Nations Security Council reflects a shared dissatisfaction with Western-dominated governance structures, even if the details of reform are fiercely contested among members.

Conclusion

The future of BRICS+ will be shaped less by external threats and more by its ability to reconcile internal contradictions and articulate a coherent vision for global governance. For now, the coalition is more a reflection of the shifting geopolitics of the Global South than a monolithic challenger to the West. The embryonic nature of its de-dollarisation efforts and the moderating influence of India and Brazil suggest that the group’s challenge is more latent than explicit. Nevertheless, as Western institutions continue to grapple with questions of legitimacy and representativeness, the mere existence of BRICS+, with all its contradictions, signals a world in flux – and an invitation to rethink the foundations of international order.

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