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From Kazan, with caution

The BRICS alliance promoted the Global South at its summit in Russia. The promise: to overcome Western hegemony

The three-day BRICS summit, chaired by Russia, has concluded in Kazan. More than 200 events were held throughout the year in several Russian cities in preparation for the summit. The participation of more than 30 delegations, 22 heads of state and government and several representatives of international organisations could not be overlookedby UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who also travelled to the summit and met with Vladimir Putin for the first time since 2022. In his speech, he said, among other things, that BRICS could play a greater role in strengthening multilateralism for global development and security.

This year's summit consisted oftwo parts: a meeting of the nine full members of the group and a BRICS+/outreach session on 'BRICS and the Global South - Building a Better World Together'. Russia's efforts were obviously focused on demonstrating the growing economic and political influence of this group of states and showing that it is by no means internationally isolated following its aggression against Ukraine.

A challenger to the West?

In the Western world, BRICS is largely perceived as an anti-Western and anti-American grouping, and its activities are almost universally criticised. Initially, however, the group did not want to be seen as a challenger to the West. Russia itself was a member of both BRICS and the G8 until 2014. Its purpose was to provide a forum for informal consultations among members rather than to formulate and implement alternative, structured policy initiatives. In their statements after the first summits in Yekaterinburg in 2009 and Brasília in 2010, participants emphasised the central role of the G20 in solving global problems and expressed strong support for multilateral diplomacy, with the United Nations playinga central role in addressing global challenges. Overall, the issue of global stabilisation in the aftermath of the 2007/2008 global financial crisis dominated the agenda.

From 2013/2014, geopolitical tensions between East and West increased. As China's economy grew, so did its geopolitical and foreign policy ambitions. Xi Jinping's rise to power as president and the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 accelerated this trend, leading to geo-economic competition with the United States, while the conflict between Russia and the West intensified after the former's annexation of Crimea in 2014. These developments were reflected in the BRICS agenda: the 2015 BRICS Summit Declaration in Ufa, Russia condemned economic sanctions that violated international law and argued that no state should enhance its own security at the expense of the security of others. Russia and China began to see BRICS as a geopolitical instrument in their confrontation with the West, while the other three members continued to prioritise economics, trade and development.

Ahead of the summit in Kazan, President Putin, echoing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said that BRICS was a non-Western grouping, but not anti-Western.

But since the accession of new members, the priorities of Russia and China on the one hand and Brazil, India and South Africa on the other have converged. Moscow and Beijing have had to tone down their hegemonic stance somewhat. At the 15th summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2023, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were invited to join the association on 1 January 2024. However, Argentina's new president, Javier Milei, rejected membership after taking office in December 2023, while Saudi Arabia opted to forgo formal membership for the time being and instead participate in the BRICS+/Outreach format.

Most of the new members, such as the United Arab Emirates or Egypt, pursue a foreign policy that balances a partnership with the West with strong economic and political ties with China and Russia. Ethiopia also maintains close ties with Moscow and Beijing, its main trading partners, and is a long-standing partner of the US. According to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, his country's membership of the BRICS group is important for deepening South-South cooperation. Thus, for all new members except Iran, BRICS is an alternative to the West, but not an explicit expression of an anti-Western policy. The majority of BRICS members want a different platform that gives voice to their political and economic interests as well as to their growing weight in the world. They clearly do not feel sufficiently heard within the existing multilateral institutions.

In the run-up to the summit in Kazan, President Putin, echoing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saidthat BRICS was a non-Western grouping, but not anti-Western. He was no doubt trying to appeal to the new and potential new members. Although the expansion ultimately fell short of the original announcements, it did succeed in increasing the importance of the BRICS *grouping* and gaining wider popularity among the countries of the so-called Global South: since then, more than 30 states have expressed interest in cooperating with the BRICS as members or partners. This year's motto, 'Strengthening Multilateralism for Equitable Global Development and Security', explicitly reflects the concerns of the Global South, such as global justice and development.

Summit outcomes

In this context, it is ironic that the BRICS Summitin Kazan began almost simultaneously with the annual meeting of the two Bretton Woods institutions - the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank - in Washington. This is particularly ironic given that the call for reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, including greater representation of developing and emerging economies in leadership positions, is one of the first 134 points in the BRICS final communiqué.

The BRICS members also welcomed the Russian initiative to create a platform for intra-BRICS grain trade and later expand it to other agricultural sectors. The use of national currencies in financial transactions between the BRICS countries and their trading partners was endorsed by all. Russia's state development and investment corporation VER.RF has already signed agreements with China and South Africa to provide credit lines in local currencies. Member states also agreed to explore the feasibility of establishing an independent payment and reserve platform (BRICS Clear). However, a BRICS payment system is not expected to be introduced in the near future. The BRICS countries are unanimous in calling for the lifting of unilaterally imposed economic sanctions.

Given India's growing global influence, it cannot be ruled out that Delhi will also seek to play an increasingly prominent role in the BRICS as the voice of the Global South,

Although most BRICS members (with the exception of Iran) do not share Russia's position on the war in Ukraine and want it to end as soon as possible, the issue was not a priority for most of the guests at the summit. Nevertheless, the final declaration states: 'We recall the respective national positions on the situation in and around Ukraine, which have been expressed in the relevant fora, including the UN Security

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Council and the UN General Assembly. We stress the need for all States to act in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations in their entirety and in their interrelation. We note with satisfaction the relevant offers of mediation to ensure a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy.' Much more attention is paid to the situations in the Middle East, Sudan, Haiti and Afghanistan. Israel's actions are strongly criticised, while Hamas (without being explicitly named) is urged to release the remaining Israeli hostages. The urgent need for an immediate, comprehensive and lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip is stressed.

Although the Global South is the addressee for most BRICS initiatives, the East, with Russia, India and China, is the original, strong core of the group. As the Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov emphasised in the briefing on the BRICS summit, from Moscow's perspective, the establishment of the RIC format in St Petersburg in 2006 paved the way for the BRICS exchange platform. The fact that the leaders of India and China are now meeting bilaterally in Russia after a five-year hiatus due to a border dispute can be seen as a diplomatic success for Putin.

Given India's growing global influence, it cannot be ruled out that Delhi will also seek to play an increasingly prominent role in the BRICS as the voice of the global South, thus influencing the internal balance of power. The recent Indo-Chinese agreement on mutual military patrols along the Line of Control in the Himalayas is a step towards defusing their border dispute, which could contribute to an improvement in their bilateral relations and consequently to a more cooperative engagement in the BRICS.

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The weight of the East is also evident in the published list of the group's partner countries — a new category that allows countries to work with the BRICS without becoming members. In June 2024, it was announced that the BRICS countries had overwhelmingly decided not to accept any new full members for the time being. The new partner countries include Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

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Overall, the summit reflects the priorities of Russian foreign policy as enshrined in the 2023 Concept: building the Great Eurasian Partnership and strengthening relations with the Global South. It is no coincidence that Russia hosted the meeting in Kazan. The capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, which is located in Europe, has been hosting the 'Russia–Islamic World' forum since 2009. The choice of venue is a gesture towards the Asian continent and the Islamic world, where Russia can count on important allies.

'Forget the BRICS' was the headline of both *The Guardian* and *Time Magazine* in 2014. Ten years later, BRICS was described as a 'geopolitical challenge'. There is no doubt that BRICS development is dynamic, both in terms of content and institutions. The common denominator after the Kazan summit is that, despite all the differences and disagreements among its members and partners, BRICS is a coalition of mostly emerging middle powers that want to overcome Western dominance, particularly in the global trade and financial architecture, and achieve a greater diversity of voices in world politics.



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