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BRICS expansion: Adaptive response or proactive restructuring of global governance?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines whether BRICS' recent expansion represents a proactive restructuring of global governance or an adaptive response to existing constraints. By integrating Amitav Acharya's multiplexity and Susan Strange's structural power framework, it analyses BRICS across systemic, institutional, and networked levels. The analysis reveals that BRICS expansion constitutes a strategic adaptation with limited transformative potential. While enlargement broadens BRICS' geopolitical and economic footprint, the bloc remains embedded within Western-dominated financial structures. Its institutional innovations function as parallel mechanisms rather than as disruptive alternatives, illustrating a tempered form of incremental revisionism. At the networked level, BRICS' influence manifests through issue-specific cooperation in energy, trade, and climate governance. However, internal divergences and structural dependencies constrain its transformative capacity. Ultimately, the research finds, BRICS pursues a sophisticated middle path – working within the system while incrementally transforming it – representing a measured evolution rather than a fundamental overhaul of global governance.

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Introduction

The global political economy is witnessing a significant transformation as the BRICS grouping – originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – undergoes its most ambitious expansion since its inception. This transition reflects a broader shift from a unipolar system to a more fragmented and decentralised configuration, shaped by the rise of emerging powers that have sought to challenge the traditional dominance of Western-led institutions through economic expansion, financial innovation, and joint diplomatic strategies in specific areas.

As BRICS evolves from a loosely defined economic grouping into a more structured geopolitical entity, its recent expansion signals a more deliberate effort to influence global governance.[1] Between the 2023 Johannesburg Summit and the 2025 Brazilian presidency of BRICS, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates have

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joined the group, marking a critical juncture, extending the bloc's economic and geopolitical footprint across multiple regions and significantly enhancing its demographic, economic, and resource capabilities. This expanded configuration reinforces BRICS' ambition to serve as a platform for South-South cooperation and a counterweight to governance structures that are not fully inclusive of them.

This strategic enlargement raises two fundamental questions: Does BRICS now possess the capacity to proactively restructure global governance, creating viable alternatives to the prevailing order? Or is BRICS displaying an adaptive response, not wanting to replace but rather to operate within existing power structures while seeking incremental reforms?

Western scholars like Joseph Nye expressed scepticism about BRICS' potential as a new centre of power. Nye argued that while BRICS serves different strategic purposes for each member – offering Russia diplomatic escape from isolation, providing China a vehicle for projecting leadership, and giving India a counterbalance against Chinese influence – these functions do not transform it into a pivotal force in world politics.[2] Such critiques highlight a broader theoretical tension: despite BRICS' ambitions, institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and UN Security Council (UNSC) remain structurally dominant, shaping financial, security, and trade norms to constrain emerging actors. Even within BRICS-led initiatives – such as the New Development Bank (NDB), Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), and intra-BRICS payment systems – dependence on the existing financial system raises questions about the bloc's ability to challenge structural power asymmetries meaningfully.

These perspectives, however, reflect broader limitations in capturing the complex reality of how BRICS operates within global governance structures. While existing approaches offer valuable insights into aspects of BRICS' development, they often struggle to fully account for the group's simultaneous engagement with and challenge to the established order. It is, thus, critical to provide some theoretical innovation that moves beyond binary assessments of whether BRICS is 'rising' or 'contained', instead revealing the multidimensional ways in which emerging powers navigate global governance – sometimes challenging, sometimes adapting to, but seeking to transform the international order in subtle yet consequential ways.

To assess whether enlargement alters this dynamic, this article offers an integrated theoretical framework revealing how the 2023–2025 expansion impacts BRICS capabilities across interconnected but distinct levels of global governance. A novel three-level analytical approach integrates Amitav Acharya's multiplexity concept with Susan Strange's political economy theory of structural power. This integration is necessary because multiplexity explains the complex, overlapping networks through which emerging powers exercise influence.[3] In contrast, structural power theory illuminates the persistent constraints these powers face, based on the entrenched global economic rules-based system.[4] Together, they provide a more nuanced understanding of how BRICS simultaneously challenges aspects of global governance while remaining embedded within its fundamental architecture.

At the systemic level, the article examines how new members affect BRICS' engagement with macro-level constraints – the fundamental architecture of global finance, including dollar hegemony and Western-dominated institutions that establish the parameters within which all global actors must operate. At the institutional level, it analyses how these members enhance BRICS' capacity to develop formal parallel governance

mechanisms – codified organisational structures with explicit treaties and operational processes, such as the NDB, which are complementary alternatives to existing global financial institutions. At the networked level, it assesses how expanded membership strengthens BRICS' flexible, issue-specific influence through non-formalised coordination; BRICS is characterised by diplomatic alignments and sectoral collaborations that bypass institutional constraints, particularly in energy markets, regional development initiatives, and emerging financial technologies.

This framework is consistently applied throughout this analysis to demonstrate how BRICS simultaneously challenges and accommodates existing power structures, revealing patterns of global governance transformation that neither pure resistance nor full assimilation models adequately capture. Drawing on primary documents, official statements, and empirical evidence from the expanded BRICS membership, this article traces how this enlargement has reconfigured the bloc's influence at each analytical level.

By differentiating these three levels of influence – systemic, institutional, networked – this article argues that the 2023–2025 BRICS expansion constitutes a calculated advancement of the bloc's structural capacities and a pragmatic adaptation to enduring systemic limitations, yielding diverse consequences for global governance transformation across various geopolitical and economic spheres. This theoretical innovation – the structural-multiplex framework – provides new insights into how emerging powers might exert substantive influence on the evolving nature of global economic conditions, notwithstanding intra-BRICS heterogeneity and systemic constraints. This presents a perspective that conventional power transition theories tend to overlook, with their predominant focus on material capabilities and institutional structures.

Limitations of conventional IR models

Traditional international relations (IR) frameworks struggle to fully capture BRICS' complex position within a global governance agenda. Mainstream IR paradigms interpret emerging power coalitions through conceptual lenses primarily calibrated to Western experiences. They limit their explanation for phenomena like BRICS expansion to, for instance, competition for power in a contested international system.

Realist theory, in both its offensive and defensive strands, offers a power-centric view of international relations where states compete for security and influence in an anarchical international arena. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer argue that major powers inevitably seek regional or global dominance under anarchy, while defensive realists such as Kenneth Waltz contend that a balanced distribution of power yields stability.[5] Hegemonic stability theorists similarly posit that a single dominant power maintaining order (exemplified by the unipolar US-led system) is necessary for global stability.[6]

Applied to BRICS, realism provides relevant insights into certain aspects of the bloc's dynamics. It correctly identifies the importance of material capabilities in BRICS' formation and expansion. It explains why economic heavyweights like China play central roles within the group and why resource-rich states like Iran and the UAE were attractive expansion candidates. Realist approaches also helpfully illuminate the strategic balancing behaviour within BRICS, particularly how smaller members leverage the group to counterbalance Western influence and how internal rivalries (such as India–China tensions) constrain deeper integration.

Liberal institutionalists, by contrast, emphasise the mitigating role of international institutions and norms in world politics. Scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue that institutions facilitate cooperation under anarchy by reducing uncertainty and creating standard rules. They enable states to achieve mutual gains and manage the complexities of the global political economy through collaboration.[7] These structures serve as platforms for state actors to project and legitimise their influence while constraining unilateral action.[8]

Indeed, the liberal perspective helps to explain BRICS' formation of formal structures like the NDB to lower transaction costs and support predictable cooperation among members. Liberal institutionalism also shows how BRICS members leverage their collective voice within existing multilateral forums like the G20 and World Trade Organisation (WTO) to pursue shared interests, and why they often frame their critiques of global governance in terms of representational fairness rather than outright rejection of institutional frameworks.

Despite their strengths, the liberal and realist frameworks reveal significant blind spots when analysing BRICS. Realism's state-centric, material focus oversimplifies BRICS' strategy, reducing international relations to zero-sum contests where state actors must either overthrow or submit to existing hierarchies or hegemonic powers. It cannot adequately explain how diverse BRICS members, lacking a formal alliance structure or shared ideology, nonetheless coordinate effectively across multiple domains. Liberal institutionalism, for its part, often underestimates the capacity of actors like BRICS to reshape or create new institutions reflecting a more plural order. It presumes that existing multilateral regimes (largely Western-designed) will remain the primary venues of cooperation, thereby neglecting forums outside traditional frameworks.

The fundamental limitation of mainstream IR theories lies in their tendency to present a false dichotomy: either conflictual power transition or smooth institutional assimilation. This binary framing fails to capture how groups like BRICS strategically navigate a middle path, simultaneously challenging certain aspects of global governance while working within others. Rising states, it has been observed, often function as norm entrepreneurs, actively constructing alternative practices and principles of cooperation rather than merely accepting or rejecting established rules.[9]

The 2023–2025 BRICS expansion particularly highlights the theoretical limitations of mainstream IR. Despite limited shared values, wide geographic dispersion, and significant internal diversity, the expanded BRICS has developed sophisticated mechanisms for collective action across multiple domains. Neither realism's focus on material power nor liberalism's institutional emphasis can fully explain this phenomenon – how BRICS generates influence despite internal power asymmetries and selective rather than comprehensive engagement with global governance structures.

Multiplexity: A layered global order

Amitav Acharya's concept of a 'multiplex world' provides a dynamic lens to capture the complex reality of the contemporary global order. In a multiplex order – analogous to a multiplex cinema – multiple plots unfold simultaneously: there is no single hegemonic storyline, but rather diverse, overlapping 'shows' (power centres, institutions, and orders) running in parallel.[10] Crucially, a multiplex order is not merely multipolar (which implies

a few great powers in a hierarchy). Instead, it is crosscutting and decentralised, comprised of multiple, intersecting layers of governance – global, regional, and issue-specific.[11] One of its key strengths is its ability to effectively reflect today's reality, where Western liberal order elements persist but are subsumed into a more complex mosaic of institutions and influences. In such a system, emerging powers gain influence not by overtaking the hegemon in a zero-sum contest but by simultaneously operating through diverse channels.

For BRICS, the multiplex perspective illuminates how the bloc functions less as a formal alliance and more as a fluid network.[12] BRICS members selectively engage different forums for different aims, leveraging the flexibility of a fragmented order. For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative creates new economic corridors outside Bretton Woods financial institutions. India's participation in groups like the Quad (comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), alongside its traditional non-aligned stance shows a pragmatic mix of alignments. Likewise, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa pursue strategic partnerships (in trade, energy, mining, and agriculture) that complement their BRICS agenda. Multiplexity highlights these behaviours; rather than conforming to a single bloc discipline or confronting the West head-on, BRICS countries weave in and out of overlapping coalitions. Power is exercised through multiple interdependent networks, not just via military might or UN votes. This explains how BRICS can exert collective influence while lacking a NATO-like collective security mechanism or an EU-style bureaucratic institution – they exploit the gaps and overlaps in governance to push their interests across various domains.

Nonetheless, multiplexity has its analytical challenges. Its breadth makes it conceptually diffuse – unlike polarity, it is harder to quantify how much influence an actor has in a web of overlapping orders. Measuring the impact of a BRICS initiative across formal and informal networks is complex. Moreover, multiplexity might downplay structural asymmetries; even if power is more widely distributed, not all networks are equal.[13] Moreover, BRICS-led initiatives often depend on or interact with entrenched structures where the West holds sway. For instance, despite launching the NDB and CRA as alternative financial tools, BRICS countries remain tied to the US dollar's dominance and the IMF's rules in global finance.[14] Multiplexity also risks overlooking persistent geopolitical rivalries. BRICS members work together based on solidarity, despite existing challenges such as the strategic competition between China and India.[15]

Acharya's approach acknowledges interdependence and overlapping institutions, yet it must be balanced with recognition that competition and hierarchy endure. In the BRICS context, the 'agree to disagree' ethos and consensus-based decision-making allow the group to function despite internal disputes, but this pragmatic compartmentalisation has limits.[16] Thus, while multiplexity usefully captures the pluralism of global order and the strategies of emerging powers, it must be supplemented with an account of the structural constraints that continue to condition what BRICS can achieve.

Integrating structural power

Susan Strange's political economy theory of structural power provides a critical counterpoint by focusing on the contexts that enable or constrain state action. Unlike relational power (through which A gets B to act), structural power is the power to shape the playing field itself – the rules, institutions, and frameworks within which states and other actors

interact.[17] Strange identified four primary structures that underpin the global political economy: security, finance, production, and knowledge.[18] The actors (often Western states or their allies) that dominate these structures effectively set the agendas and limits of what other states can do. For example, control over the financial structure – via institutions like the IMF/World Bank and currencies like the dollar – allows certain powers to influence credit flows, investment norms, and crisis responses on a global scale.

Dominance in the security structure (alliances, military technology, arms regimes) shapes which conflicts or threats are prioritised. Control of production networks and critical supply chains confers leverage in trade and industry standards. The knowledge structure – encompassing technology, education, media, and intellectual property – enables the diffusion of norms and ideas favouring the dominant states' worldview.[19] In Strange's view, these deep structures often operate implicitly: they do not require direct coercion. Instead, they create a persistent tilt in the playing field that advantages some and disadvantages others.

For BRICS, Strange's concept explains why they encounter embedded barriers to reshaping the global order despite their growing material weight. As BRICS countries form new arrangements, they remain embedded in structures designed mainly by and for established powers. The dollar-centric finance system, Western-led security alliances, transnational corporate value chains, and Anglophone knowledge networks constitute a framework of structural power that is not easily dislodged. As Strange and later scholars observe, structural power can endure even when formal hierarchies shift, because institutions and market forces have inertia.[20]

Recent work by global political economy scholars has updated Strange's framework to contemporary realities. For instance, Maria Gwynn highlights that structural power is not static or solely wielded by states – international institutions can entrench structural advantages or diffuse power to lesser actors in limited ways.[21] The rise of digital platforms and Big Tech has introduced new dimensions to the knowledge structure, as control over data and standards (often by US firms backed by US regulations) reinforces American dominance in subtle forms.[22] What this means for emerging powers is that structural constraints evolve; BRICS faces not only the legacy of the Bretton Woods order, but also new structural arenas like internet governance and fintech standards, where they are trying to catch up. Strange's insight was that power lies in shaping the context, and clearly today's context – from finance to technology – remains largely skewed towards the West. BRICS may accumulate capabilities and create parallel institutions, but structural power reminds us that the game's rules still largely reflect Western preferences, making truly autonomous paths difficult.

Integrating multiplexity and structural power: A three-level framework

Multiplexity and structural power offer complementary theoretical lenses for analysing whether emerging power coalitions represent a proactive restructuring of global governance or an adaptive response to existing constraints. When integrated, they can provide insights into how actors like BRICS navigate between challenging and accommodating existing power structures. This integration can be operationalised through a three-level framework that distinguishes between systemic, institutional, and networked dimensions of power, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. BRICS' position at the nexus of multiplexity and structural power across systemic, institutional, and networked levels.

Level of Analysis	Multiplexity Perspective (decentralised, overlapping order)	Structural Power Perspective (entrenched hierarchies)	Expected Strategies	Predicted Challenges
Systemic	Fragmented global governance with multiple actors and regional orders shaping norms beyond any single hegemon's control.	The enduring dominance of Western-led structures (eg, the US dollar, the IMF, the WTO, and the UNSC) sets fundamental parameters for finance, security, and trade.	Advocate multipolarity and a greater voice for emerging powers while engaging with incumbent institutions.	Dependence on existing financial and security frameworks; limited influence on core rules of the game.
Institutional	Parallel institutions and forums proliferate (eg, NDB, CRA), allowing new cooperation and development financing channels.	Traditional institutions constrain autonomy – BRICS-led bodies must interface with global markets and standards shaped mainly by the West.	Build alternative institutions to complement (not fully replace) Bretton Woods institutions, reducing reliance on West-centric bodies.	Legitimacy deficit and scale limitations of new institutions; continued reliance on Western financial networks (eg, Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), credit ratings).
Networked	Flexible, issue-specific coalitions and South–South networks enable influence in climate, health, and technology (shifting alliances by issue).	Prevailing global norms and standards (tech, regulatory, trading rules) still mainly originate from the G7/OECD, framing the context in which networks operate.	Leverage ad-hoc alignments and regional partnerships to pursue common interests without directly confronting big powers.	Fragmentation – lack of a cohesive grand strategy; sectoral constraints mean efforts often remain piecemeal and don't cumulate to structural change.

Source: Author's own analytical framework drawing on Amitav Acharya, 'After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order', *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85; and Susan Strange, 'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony', *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): 551–74.

The structural-multiplex framework reveals tensions between the diffusion of governance across multiple centres and the persistence of entrenched power hierarchies across three interconnected levels.

At the systemic level, multiplexity theory suggests the global order is increasingly characterised by overlapping spheres of influence rather than a single hegemonic centre, creating space for emerging powers to exercise agency through diverse channels. Yet structural power theory identifies how deep-seated asymmetries in finance, knowledge, security, and production shape the parameters within which all actors operate. Dollar dominance in global finance, Western control of multilateral agenda-setting, and concentrated technological innovation constrain emerging powers regardless of their material capabilities. Consequently, their systemic influence remains selective – they may achieve greater voice and representation but struggle to fundamentally reshape structural foundations, with reform efforts yielding incremental rather than transformative change.

This dynamic extends to the institutional level, where emerging powers pursue selective institutionalisation by creating parallel mechanisms alongside established structures.

These new institutions represent genuine innovation within multiplexity, providing platforms to pursue common interests and develop complementary governance norms. However, structural power ensures these parallel institutions remain embedded within broader frameworks dominated by established powers. Even seemingly autonomous institutions must interface with existing financial, legal, and normative structures, limiting their transformative potential. This interaction produces 'variable geometry institutions' – flexible arrangements allowing different levels of engagement depending on participants' interests while accommodating continued structural dependence.[23]

At the networked level, the framework envisions networked pluralism – overlapping, issue-specific coalitions allowing differentiated leadership across various domains. This flexible approach enhances emerging powers' interaction capacity to coordinate positions and influence outcomes across multiple governance domains simultaneously. Members may assume leadership in specific areas based on their capabilities, creating a distribution of influence rather than a hierarchical bloc. Nevertheless, structural power embeds these networked arrangements within deeper structures that determine available options and prevailing standards. Global regulatory frameworks, technical standards, and market practices established by dominant powers influence even seemingly autonomous networks, while networked pluralism risks fragmenting efforts and complicating the translation of issue-specific coordination into comprehensive structural change.

Across all three levels, the framework anticipates that emerging power coalitions will develop differentiated strategies that are potentially more accommodative at the systemic level while being more institutionally innovative and forming into networked arrangements. They will likely create parallel rather than replacement institutions, engage in flexible coordination rather than forming rigid bloc identities, and experience varying influence across issue areas, with greater impact where structural constraints are less rigid. Their internal diversity will typically be managed through consensus-based approaches, producing incremental rather than revolutionary outcomes.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the structural-multiplex framework conceptualises emerging power coalitions as operating at the intersection of multiplexity and structural power. Multiplexity encapsulates the decentralised, plural, and fluid networked forms of governance through flexible coalitions, alternative institutional mechanisms, and issue-specific alignments. Structural power highlights the enduring influence of financial, institutional, and normative structures, imposing significant constraints on how far and how fast alternative mechanisms can reshape global governance.

This integrated framework avoids overly optimistic assessments of emerging powers as revolutionary actors and dismissive characterisations of them as merely accommodating existing structures. Instead, it provides analytical tools for understanding the complex, multidimensional ways these powers navigate between constraints and opportunities across different governance domains.

BRICS' multilevel evolution: Building systemic influence, institutional alternatives, and networked cooperation

Building upon the theoretical framework that integrates Acharya's multiplexity with Strange's structural power, this section applies the three-level analytical approach to

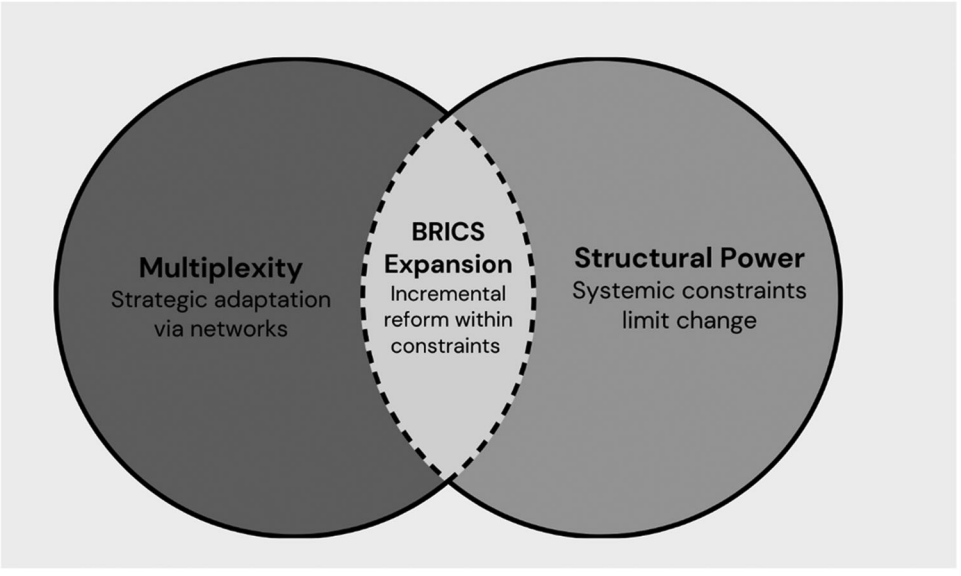


Figure 1. BRICS Expansion at the nexus of multiplexity and structural power.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal, and Louis W. Goodman, 'Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order', *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (November 6, 2023): 2339–65; and Susan Strange, 'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony', *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): 551–74.

empirically examine how BRICS expansion has reshaped the bloc's capabilities and influence across global governance.

Systemic level: Global power shifts and structural constraints

In the early 2000s, rapid growth across major emerging economies signalled a shift in the balance of global economic power. In 2001, Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill famously coined the term 'BRIC' for Brazil, Russia, India, and China, predicting these countries would drive global growth in the coming decade.[24] This proved prescient: between 2000 and 2011, BRIC nations' share of world output (by purchasing power parity, or PPP) grew from roughly 8% to 19%.[25] Such projections underscored a widening gap between the rising weight of the Global South and an international governance architecture still dominated by the West.

Developing countries increasingly argued that the Western-led, post-war order – epitomised by the Bretton Woods institutions and the G7 – was outdated and stacked against their interests.[26] Long-standing disparities, such as the overrepresentation of advanced economies in the IMF and the hegemony of the US dollar in global finance, have created structural disadvantages for developing nations, fuelling calls for a more equitable system. These imbalances restrict policy autonomy, increase borrowing costs, and heighten emerging economies' vulnerability to external shocks. For example, as of 2023 – prior to the expansion to ten members – the five BRICS nations (South Africa was added in 2010) accounted for over 31% of global GDP (in PPP terms), marginally surpassing the G7's share.[27] Yet, Western powers maintained disproportionate influence in institutions like the IMF and UNSC, reflecting a persistent institutional inertia that

disadvantages the Global South. UN Secretary-General António Guterres characterised this imbalance starkly, observing that the Bretton Woods system 'was created by rich countries to benefit rich countries', highlighting, in a telling example, that no African nations participated in its formation in 1944.[28]

This systemic imbalance set the stage for the formation of BRICS as a collective voice of emerging powers. The eruption of the 2008 financial crisis – whose epicentre lay in the United States – exposed the fragility of a governance system still dominated by a handful of advanced economies.[29] In the scramble to restore confidence, leaders of the traditional industrial states of G7 conceded that meaningful stabilisation would require the fiscal space of China, the foreign-exchange reserves of the Gulf and East Asia, and the growth prospects of India and Brazil. Accordingly, at its Washington summit of November 2008, the G7 ceded centre-stage to an enlarged, leaders-level Group of 20 that included every future BRICS member; the communiqué explicitly framed the G20 as 'the premier forum for our international economic cooperation'.[30] This was foreshadowed by historical precedent; after the 1973 oil shock, Western powers had created the G7 (expanding the earlier G5) to include more stakeholders in economic coordination. Elevating the G20 during the 2007–2008 financial crisis underscored existing frameworks' inadequacies in addressing economic instability and equitable resource distribution.[31]

BRICS countries seized on this moment. In June 2009, the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, and China convened their first BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, laden with symbolism of a 'dawn of a new economic order' led by emerging economies.[32] The following year, South Africa was invited to join, transforming BRIC into BRICS and extending the bloc's reach to the African continent.

BRICS' expansion in the 2020s further illustrates the bloc's systemic ambitions – and limitations. In August 2023, at the Johannesburg summit, BRICS leaders formally invited seven more states (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) to join.[33] Argentina's new government reversed its application and declined the invitation. Indonesia, initially hesitant, also announced it would become a full member by 2025.[34]

Saudi Arabia's status within BRICS remains ambiguous. While officially delaying its decision on full membership following the 2023 Johannesburg summit invitation, the Saudis have consistently participated in some BRICS meetings, particularly in political coordination tracks. This creates institutional uncertainty – does Saudi Arabia's ongoing engagement constitute de facto membership despite the absence of formal confirmation, or does it represent a new category of association? Adding to this complexity, the Brazilian presidency of BRICS in 2025 has included Saudi Arabia in its official member listings, suggesting a flexible, evolving approach to membership.[35]

The enlarged BRICS now encompasses nearly half of the world's population (about 46%), controls 40% of global trade, over one-third of global GDP (around 36% in PPP terms), and is responsible for 40% of crude oil production and imports.[36] Between 2009 and 2023, BRICS nations recorded an average annual GDP growth rate of around 4.5%, compared to roughly 1.5–2% for the G7.[37] By 2023, BRICS' GDP in purchasing power parity terms had reached about $60 trillion, surpassing the PPP size of G7 economies.[38] Moreover, research by Logan Cochrane and El Mehdi Zaidan documents that the

combined military personnel of BRICS nations now exceed 10 million, bolstering the bloc's strategic capabilities relative to many G7 states.[39]

Indeed, BRICS' growth reflects widespread dissatisfaction among emerging economies with a world order perceived as unresponsive to their needs. Many other countries have expressed interest in BRICS membership or affiliation, viewing the bloc as an alternative platform to amplify their interests and access development cooperation outside Western-dominated channels.[40]

However, structural constraints persist. Member countries continue to rely on existing institutions and markets for stability, a reality underscored during crises. For example, when commodity-dependent BRICS economies faced turmoil (as Brazil did during earlier debt troubles, or South Africa during the COVID 19 pandemic), they found that the IMF and global banking system remained key backstops, notwithstanding BRICS' desire for autonomy. The US dollar still accounts for about 80% of world trade settlement, and most foreign exchange reserves, including those of BRICS central banks, are dollar or euro-denominated.[41] Efforts to reform traditional institutions have yielded only incremental change. Although the 2010 IMF quota reforms modestly increased the voting shares of emerging and developing economies, the US continues to hold more than 15% of total voting power – effectively giving it veto power over key decisions that require an 85% supermajority, since no such decision can pass without US support.[42]

The heterogeneity of BRICS members – spanning democracies and autocracies, energy importers and exporters, regional rivals and allies – also dilutes their cohesion on systemic reforms, the research indicates. Proposals to expand the UNSC to include India, Brazil, or South Africa have languished in the face of great-power reluctance, including China and Russia. In effect, BRICS has encountered the existing order's entrenched structural power – the deep-rooted financial, institutional, and normative dominance that advanced economies enjoy.

Institutional level: Building parallel mechanisms and governance structures

As BRICS evolved from an acronym into an informal organisation, it progressively developed its institutional architecture. The first formal BRIC summit in 2009 signalled the bloc's intent to move beyond a Goldman Sachs concept towards the formation of a geopolitical actor.[43] Over the next few years, the member states set up a rudimentary but growing institutional ecosystem to coordinate their policies and showcase the bloc's viability. A crucial early step was inviting South Africa to join in December 2010 (formally attending from 2011), thereby broadening BRICS' geographic and political representation to Africa. Despite its relatively smaller economy, South Africa's inclusion was symbolically crucial for BRICS' legitimacy as a platform for the wider Global South, and it underscored the founding members' aim to differentiate BRICS from narrowly economic groupings like the G7.

By 2014, BRICS had advanced from holding annual leader summits to launching concrete cooperative bodies. At the Fortaleza summit, BRICS established two landmark institutional initiatives: a multilateral development bank and a financial reserve arrangement. The NDB was established to mobilise infrastructure and sustainable development finance across BRICS and other emerging economies. Headquartered in Shanghai, the NDB was explicitly conceived as an alternative source of project funding to complement the

World Bank and regional development banks. It launched with equal capital contributions from the five members and an authorised capital of $100 billion. [44]

In parallel, the BRICS governments signed the CRA, which was introduced as a financial safety net, offering liquidity support to member nations during balance-of-payments or currency crises, thereby reducing their reliance on IMF emergency lending.[45] With a $100 billion currency swap pool, the CRA received commitments of $41 billion from China, $18 billion each from India, Russia, and Brazil, and $5 billion from South Africa.[46] Notably, both the NDB and CRA were established via formal treaties, marking BRICS' first tangible institutional treaties and indicating a shift from mere political dialogue to operational collaboration.

In the years since, BRICS has continued to develop its institutional apparatus, though with mixed success. The NDB has become the flagship BRICS institution. By the end of 2023, the NDB had approved $34.8 billion in loans for 105 projects ranging from transport corridors in India to renewable energy in Brazil and support to economic recovery for its members during the COVID-19 pandemic.[47] The NDB had also begun to expand its membership; in 2021, it admitted countries beyond BRICS (including Bangladesh, the UAE, and Egypt) as partner members. This expansion was intended to increase the bank's capital base and reach, echoing BRICS' broader outreach to the Global South. Despite these achievements, the NDB's scale remains modest relative to the World Bank, over five times smaller in capital terms.[48] In 2022, sanctions on Russia led the NDB to freeze funding there due to compliance risks, illustrating how geopolitical crises affect BRICS institutions like traditional banks.

By contrast, the CRA presents a cautionary tale about the difficulties of breaking free of prevailing structures. Since its inception, no member state has ever activated the CRA's swap lines for a crisis loan, not even during the severe market turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic. The arrangement's design imposes conservative limits. Each country can immediately access only a small portion (30%) of its maximum drawing quota; tapping beyond that requires entering an IMF programme, effectively tethering the CRA's use to the IMF's endorsement.[49] This reflects a broader tension between the bloc's normative ambitions and its constrained institutional tools, which, though symbolically important, have yet to match the systemic impact of their Bretton Woods counterparts.

Beyond the NDB and CRA, BRICS has developed a suite of ancillary institutions and forums that underpin its cooperation. These include regular meetings of ministers (ie, ministers of foreign affairs, finance, health, education), a BRICS Think Tanks Council and Academic Forum to encourage scholarly exchange, a BRICS Interbank Cooperation Mechanism to link national development banks, and even people-to-people initiatives such as youth summits and cultural festivals. Many of these were initiated in the 2010s as the bloc sought to institutionalise dialogue across sectors. For example, a BRICS Information Sharing & Exchange Platform was formed to pool economic data, and an annual joint BRICS Statistical Publication has been produced since 2011 to harmonise reporting on statistics. While technical, such institutions create epistemic networks and a shared knowledge base within BRICS. By the late 2010s, the agenda of BRICS cooperation spanned multiple thematic areas and involved dozens of working groups. While not all these initiatives remain active, this activity toward institutional densification reflects the members' desire to brand BRICS as a comprehensive partnership, not just a leaders' club.

Networked level: Issue-specific cooperation and coalitions

BRICS' influence is perhaps most evident in the networked realm – the web of issue-specific partnerships, sectoral coordination efforts and diplomatic coalitions that the member countries have developed. Unlike formal institutions, these networks are often ad hoc, flexible, and driven by functional needs or shared interests in particular domains. They exemplify what scholars describe as 'minilateralism', club diplomacy or G-Plus structures within the multiplex global order, where states form fluid coalitions to tackle discrete problems.[50] From energy and infrastructure to digital governance and health, BRICS nations have engaged in collaborations that bypass or supplement universal institutions.

One prominent area is energy cooperation. BRICS includes some of the world's top energy producers and consumers, motivating collaboration on fossil fuels and renewables. As of 2024, BRICS countries collectively account for more than 40% of global oil production and consumption, producing and consuming three-fourths of the world's coal and about 40% of its natural gas.[51] BRICS has increasingly discussed the integration of national infrastructure supporting power supply, including the prospects for a 'BRICS energy grid' or cross-border electricity connectivity. The 2024 BRICS Just Energy Transition Report highlights regional power interconnection and grid integration as strategic goals, with member states exploring ways to optimise resource sharing and improve efficiency through collaborative grid modernisation and smart grid research.[52]

Perhaps more tangibly, BRICS cooperation intersects with broader producer coalitions. Russia's partnership with the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), through the OPEC+ arrangement, and the accession of oil-rich states like the UAE and Iran into BRICS link the group to global oil supply management. In 2023, for example, Russia and Saudi Arabia coordinated voluntary oil production cuts through OPEC+ to stabilise prices amid market volatility, a move that significantly affected global energy markets.[53] While these moves happened outside the BRICS institution per se, the growing overlap of BRICS membership with major energy producers suggests the bloc will be an essential caucus for energy diplomacy.

Another arena of engagement is digital governance and technology. BRICS governments share an interest in shaping the rules of the emerging digital economy – from internet infrastructure and fintech to the increasing use of artificial intelligence – in ways that reflect their interests and conceptions of sovereignty. By 2022, BRICS launched a Digital BRICS Task Force, and at the 2024 Kazan summit, the members announced the creation of a BRICS Digital Ecosystem Cooperation Network. Such efforts reflect practical economic considerations (with the considerable potential for e-commerce and digital services across BRICS markets) and strategic motives (ie, reducing vulnerability to foreign technology domination or sanctions).

For example, the areas of payments and financial technology have been a focus of networked cooperation. Rather than presenting a direct challenge to the US dollar's role in global finance, these efforts appear to prioritise risk mitigation and the diversification of settlement mechanisms in response to geopolitical uncertainty and financial fragmentation. For countries like Russia and Iran, these measures are crucial to mitigate the impact of sanctions and geopolitical pressures; for others, they serve as strategic insurance

against potential disruptions.[54] While specific initiatives like 'BRICS Pay' – an integrated digital payment platform linking national payment systems – have been discussed, broader efforts aim to create decentralised settlement platforms. In 2023, the bloc discussed plans for BRICS Clear, a proposed mechanism to clear cross-border settlements without relying on Western-controlled financial networks like SWIFT.

China's Cross-Border International Payment System (CIPS) and Russia's System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) have been examined as components that could interface for BRICS-wide use, and the members have been sharing experiences on rolling out central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), which might one day be interoperable. In addition, bilateral mechanisms such as the Local Currency Settlement System (LCSS) between India and the UAE already facilitate trade in domestic currencies, bypassing third-country currencies and improving liquidity management.[55] Official data show that Chinese renminbi (RMB)-denominated cross-border settlements – including both current account transactions and direct investment – totalled RMB 17.8 trillion in the first three quarters of 2024, signalling growing traction in the international use of RMB.[56] Russia–China trade now occurs predominantly in rubles and RMB, exemplifying a broader shift toward currency diversification among BRICS members.[57]

BRICS has also served as a coordination platform in multilateral diplomacy and issue-specific coalitions. The foreign ministers of BRICS often meet on the sidelines of major UN gatherings to harmonise their positions on various issues. BRICS members have acted as a loose bloc on specific issues; for example, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa (the BASIC states) have coordinated their stance in global climate change negotiations since the late 2000s,[58] pushing for the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and greater climate finance for developing nations.

Such alignments are not automatic. Internal divisions (for instance, India's border tensions with China, or Brazil's liberal internationalist outlook under President Lula vs the more revisionist stances of Russia and China) can limit what BRICS collectively says or does on security matters. Also, BRICS countries have shown a cautious attitude toward sensitive security issues. All five original members were notably reluctant to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in UN votes in 2022: China, India, and South Africa abstained on key resolutions, while Brazil condemned the invasion only in general terms, reflecting a shared aversion to Western unilateral sanctions and a preference for dialogue.[59] Nonetheless, BRICS functions increasingly as a diplomatic caucus, with its members regularly consulting and sometimes coordinating positions, particularly in forums like the G20, WTO and IMF, on issues such as trade negotiations and institutional reform, though coherence remains uneven.[60]

Beyond state diplomacy, BRICS has spurred networks of experts, civil society and private sector actors, reinforcing its cooperative agenda. The BRICS Think Tanks Council and academic exchanges through the BRICS Academic Forum have facilitated the development of shared concepts such as 'inclusive multipolarity' and a 'developmental paradigm', helping to socialise the idea of BRICS as a normative actor. The BRICS Business Council has convened business leaders annually since 2013, resulting in numerous commercial memoranda of understanding as well as some investments (for example, joint ventures in natural resources and industrial projects as noted earlier, spurred by BRICS interactions). A BRICS Women's Business Alliance was formed in 2020 to promote female entrepreneurship across member countries. These networks indicate that BRICS

cooperation extends well beyond presidential summits, embedding itself in societal and economic linkages.

That said, the effectiveness of BRICS' networked cooperation faces practical constraints. Many BRICS initiatives, especially those that are non-binding, suffer from limited funding or political attention. Joint statements or working groups do not always translate into concrete action on the ground. Language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and sheer distance (BRICS spans four continents) can impede follow-through.

Moreover, each BRICS member balances its participation in BRICS networks with other bilateral and multilateral commitments. South Africa, for example, must carefully navigate its BRICS engagement alongside its obligations to the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, and its historical ties to Western economies, which still constitute major trading partners and sources of investment. Similarly, India prioritises its Quad and Indo-Pacific partnerships on technological and security matters when they align with its strategic interests, particularly in counterbalancing Chinese influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Under President Lula, Brazil calibrates its South-South engagement through both BRICS and Mercosur, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and increasingly rekindled partnerships with European and North American actors on climate and trade issues. While viewing BRICS as a crucial platform for diplomatic legitimacy amid Western sanctions, Russia maintains parallel engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Eurasian Economic Union, where it exercises greater regional influence. Despite championing BRICS expansion and financial initiatives, China prioritises the Belt and Road Initiative and bilateral economic relationships where it can exercise more direct structural leverage than possible within the consensus-driven BRICS framework.

This means BRICS networks must continually prove what value they add to retain members' engagement. When interests align, such as in vaccine cooperation during COVID-19, BRICS can act as a convening mechanism (the countries held multiple health ministers' meetings and even floated the idea of a BRICS Vaccine Research Centre). However, when interests clash, BRICS must settle for the lowest common denominator outcomes. For example, on internet governance, Russia and China have advocated 'cyber sovereignty' (greater state control over cyberspace), whereas Brazil and India (while sensitive to data privacy) have been more supportive of multi-stakeholder models; as a result, BRICS digital declarations tread carefully, focusing on shared concerns like cybersecurity and addressing the digital divide without delving into governance regimes. Thus, while the scope of networked cooperation is broad, its depth is uneven – substantial in areas of mutual gain (development finance, trade facilitation, technical standards) and shallow where strategic outlooks diverge.

Assessing BRICS expansion through the structural-multiplex framework

This section applies the three-level structural-multiplex framework to the empirical evidence presented above, examining whether BRICS expansion represents a proactive restructuring of global governance or an adaptive response to existing constraints. By systematically analysing BRICS' strategic enlargement through systemic, institutional, and networked dimensions, we can evaluate the framework's explanatory power while revealing both the possibilities and limitations of BRICS as a transformative actor in global

governance. This analytical approach allows us to move beyond binary characterisations and assess the nuanced ways that BRICS simultaneously challenges and accommodates existing power structures across different domains of global order.

Systemic level analysis: Navigating structural hierarchies in a multiplex environment

At the systemic level, BRICS expansion manifests a hybridised influence strategy operating at the intersection of structural constraints and multiplex opportunities. As Strange argued, control over global finance represents a fundamental pillar of structural power, and this remains evident in the continued dominance of Western-created financial architecture. The persistence of dollar hegemony exemplifies the structural power constraining BRICS' systemic options. The empirical record documents that despite years of rhetoric about de-dollarisation, even Russia–China trade has only recently shifted toward national currencies, primarily as a response to sanctions rather than a proactive restructuring of global financial infrastructure.

Similarly, governance structures in institutions like the IMF and UN Security Council systematically privilege established powers, with the United States and European allies maintaining disproportionate voting rights and veto powers despite decades of calls for reform. Even after years of BRICS advocacy, the 2010s IMF quota adjustments yielded only modest increases in emerging markets' voting shares. At the same time, the United States and allies retained effective veto power over major decisions. This pattern directly confirms Strange's thesis that structural power persists even when material capabilities shift, illustrating the difficulty of challenging entrenched institutional advantages.

The inclusion of Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the UAE extends BRICS' demographic and economic weight, strengthening its claim to represent the Global South in global governance dialogues. The expanded BRICS now accounts for 40% of international crude oil production and imports, providing significant leverage in energy markets that was previously unavailable to the original five members.

The intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China increasingly forces other BRICS members to navigate carefully between these poles, limiting the bloc's ability to present a truly cohesive alternative vision of global order. For Russia, Western sanctions following its actions in Ukraine have demonstrated the enduring capacity of Western-dominated financial structures to impose costs on states that challenge core norms.

Internal rivalries within BRICS create additional systemic constraints that are not fully captured by either multiplexity or structural power frameworks. The presence of competing stakeholders inevitably strains the bloc's ability to forge unified positions by internalising rivalries. For instance, the India–China relationship, marked by border disputes and strategic competition across South Asia, represents a fundamental tension at the heart of the bloc. Despite the October 2024 border agreement between Beijing and New Delhi establishing patrolling rights in disputed territories, this arrangement represents tactical de-escalation rather than strategic reconciliation. Also, the addition of Ethiopia and Egypt introduces the contentious issue of Nile water rights into BRICS deliberations; their competing interests over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam represent a significant

regional rivalry that the bloc must now navigate. Similarly, Iran's adversarial relationship with Western powers creates tensions for members like India and Brazil, both of which maintain significant economic and strategic ties with the United States and Europe.

The systemic-level analysis suggests that BRICS expansion represents primarily an adaptive response to existing constraints rather than a proactive restructuring of global governance. While the bloc has successfully positioned itself as a voice for emerging powers, its ability to reshape systemic power distributions remains limited by external structural constraints and internal strategic divergences.

Institutional level analysis: Parallel mechanisms amid structural dependence

At the institutional level, the structural-multiplex framework illuminates BRICS' strategy of selective institutionalisation, formalising cooperation in domains where members share clear interests while maintaining flexibility in more contentious areas. The NDB embodies this pattern, functioning as a complement to rather than a replacement for the World Bank and regional development banks. With over $34.8 billion approved for 105 projects by 2023, the NDB demonstrates BRICS' ability to create functioning institutional alternatives, even as these remain embedded within the broader global financial architecture.

The CRA provides a revealing test case. Despite its $100 billion capacity as an alternative to IMF emergency lending, the CRA has never been activated, not even during COVID-19 market volatility. More tellingly, its design requires IMF programme approval to access more than 30% of a member's quota – a direct embodiment of Strange's structural power concept, where even alternatives must accommodate dominant structures. This empirical reality provides compelling evidence that BRICS' institutional innovations remain structurally dependent on the broader financial system, limiting their transformative potential.

The institutional limitations of the structural-multiplex framework become evident when examining BRICS' decision-making processes and implementation challenges. BRICS operates as a loose, intergovernmental forum with strictly consensus-based decision-making. This institutional design reflects an adaptive strategy: BRICS has favoured horizontal growth (broad membership) over vertical integration (binding commitments). The consensus-based approach within BRICS often results in pursuing minimal common denominators rather than ambitious institutional innovation. Official declarations consistently support multilateralism, state sovereignty, and UN centrality, but avoid censuring members' controversial actions or imposing specific policy commitments.

The institutional-level analysis reveals a mixed pattern. BRICS' parallel institutions represent a proactive effort to reshape aspects of global governance, particularly in development finance. However, as noted above, these institutions remain structurally dependent on broader financial and regulatory systems dominated by established powers, limiting their transformative potential.

Networked level analysis: Issue-specific cooperation amid fragmentation

The expanded BRICS now links Asia (China, India, Indonesia, Russia), Africa (South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia), the Middle East (Iran, UAE), and Latin America (Brazil) into a single diplomatic network. Each new member brings bilateral ties with the original five and access to wider networks. The UAE connects BRICS to Gulf Arab financial networks, while Ethiopia and Egypt bring connections to the Horn of Africa and the Arab League.

BRICS countries have leveraged this networked approach across multiple domains. In climate negotiations, the BASIC grouping (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) has coordinated positions to advocate for common but differentiated responsibilities, influencing global climate governance without requiring formal institutional structures. The overlap between BRICS membership and OPEC+ in energy markets creates informal coordination channels that enhance the bloc's influence on global oil supply management. Some of these networked arrangements show how BRICS can produce concrete policy outcomes that affect global markets, even without formal institutional mechanisms.

This flexible approach also functions as a conflict-avoidance mechanism. Unlike a tight-knit alliance, BRICS members maintain multiple affiliations – India participates in the Quad; Brazil remains a close partner of the US and EU; China and Russia cultivate their own bilateral and regional networks. Thus, this overlapping web requires flexible alignment – the coalition explicitly allows diversified partnerships without demanding exclusive loyalty.

The BRICS system's multiplexity enables member states to assume differentiated leadership roles across specific domains. China leads in infrastructure and financial connectivity, India focuses on digital governance, Brazil advocates for climate diplomacy, and Russia and South Africa concentrate on resource and energy governance.

This networked pluralism generates three strategic advantages for BRICS that directly test the theoretical propositions about adaptation versus transformation. First, it enables issue-specific cooperation without requiring consensus on all matters, circumventing the internal divisions that might otherwise paralyse a more formalised bloc. Second, it creates multiple pathways for influence, allowing BRICS to engage simultaneously through formal institutions, bilateral arrangements, and informal coalitions, depending on which venue offers the most traction for a given issue. Third, it fosters resilience by distributing cooperation across various forums rather than concentrating it in a single institutional structure vulnerable to external pressure or internal disagreements.

However, the networked approach also reveals significant limitations, as seen through the structural-multiplex framework. The proliferation of cooperative mechanisms can lead to fragmentation and duplication of efforts, with many initiatives suffering from limited funding, bureaucratic hurdles, and competing priorities among members. This suggests network proliferation can lead to inefficiency, rather than enhanced influence, without sufficient coordination.

Strange's structural power theory helps explain why networked cooperation often fails to translate into structural transformation; even as BRICS members coordinate in various forums, they remain embedded in deeper structures of finance, knowledge, and security that shape the parameters of what networked arrangements can achieve. For instance, efforts to coordinate digital policies among BRICS countries occur within a technological landscape still defined mainly by Western firms, standards, and intellectual property regimes (in addition to the internal divergences over digital sovereignty), constraining how far BRICS' networked cooperation can reshape digital governance.

The expanded membership significantly complicates these networked dynamics. Indonesia's inclusion strengthens BRICS' position in Southeast Asian affairs. Still, its traditional diplomatic non-alignment and economic ties with the United States create potential tensions in coordinating positions on regional security or trade governance. This illustrates

the complex balancing act that new members must perform between BRICS engagement and existing alignments.

The networked level analysis thus suggests that BRICS expansion represents both adaptive and proactive elements, with neither predominating. The bloc's flexible, issue-specific approach to cooperation enables it to navigate structural constraints adaptively, finding spaces for influence without directly challenging the fundamental architecture of global governance. Simultaneously, creating new networks and coalitions represents a proactive effort to reshape governance in specific domains, particularly where existing institutions are perceived as inadequate or unrepresentative.

Beyond economic coordination: Normative and securitised dimensions

BRICS has increasingly positioned itself as an advocate for alternative conceptions of global governance that challenge Western liberal internationalism. The bloc emphasises sovereign equality, non-interference, and developmental pluralism in contrast to liberal norms of conditionality and intervention. As Strange argued, structural power encompasses the power to shape ideas and norms, and BRICS seeks to exercise this through what Oliver Stuenkel terms 'post-Western' principles of international cooperation.[61]

Promoting a 'non-Western-centric identity' represents a form of ideational power exercised through the network – an attempt to legitimise a vision of global order where diverse civilisations and political systems coexist under plural rules. Yet BRICS must adapt to internal differences; members are divided as to where they fit on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism, and the attendant implications regarding members' values; the bloc therefore chooses to frame its identity around common denominators such as sovereignty and developmentalism. These internal normative divergences constrain BRICS' ability to present a coherent alternative value system to liberal internationalism, however, resulting in normative minimalism.

From a security perspective, BRICS expansion introduces new dynamics. The inclusion of Iran adds a more explicitly geopolitical dimension to what began as a primarily economic grouping. Similarly, Ethiopia's complex security environment brings regional security considerations more directly into BRICS' purview. However, this security dimension remains constrained by persistent divergences among members' strategic interests.

The normative and security dimensions thus add further nuance to assessing whether BRICS expansion represents adaptation or transformation. The bloc's articulation of alternative governance principles suggests a more proactive challenge to the liberal order than its institutional innovations alone would indicate. Yet internal normative and strategic divergences limit the coherence and impact of this challenge, reinforcing the pattern of incremental recalibration rather than revolutionary transformation identified across the systemic, institutional, and networked levels.

Conclusion: BRICS expansion as strategic adaptation with limited transformative potential

Synthesising insights across the three analytical levels and incorporating normative and security dimensions, the structural-multiplex framework reveals that BRICS expansion represents neither a revolutionary challenge to the existing global order nor mere adaptive

accommodation to Western dominance. Instead, the evidence supports a more nuanced characterisation: BRICS expansion constitutes strategic adaptation with limited but consequential transformative potential in specific domains.

This assessment confirms the value of the bridge between Acharya's multiplex concept and Strange's structural power theory. The multiplex theory highlights that we are not simply moving from one hegemonic order to another, but to a more complex architecture where BRICS operates in layered, overlapping spheres of influence. Meanwhile, Strange's structural power reminds us that enduring change comes from reshaping the deep structures of finance, security, and knowledge – a feat that BRICS has only begun approaching in limited domains.

Adaptation predominates at the systemic level, where BRICS remains embedded in dollar-centric financial structures and Western-dominated security frameworks despite rhetorical challenges to unipolarity. The persistence of these systemic constraints validates Strange's proposition that structural power endures even as material capabilities shift.

More transformative potential exists at the institutional and networked levels, where BRICS has created parallel mechanisms like the NDB and flexible issue-specific coalitions. These innovations represent tangible efforts to reshape aspects of global governance. Yet they remain constrained by structural dependencies, as illustrated by the CRA's reliance on IMF approval and the limits of bilateral currency arrangements in challenging dollar hegemony.

The expanded membership enhances BRICS' legitimacy as a representative of diverse non-Western interests, but simultaneously introduces new coordination challenges. Adding members with divergent interests complicates consensus-building and strategic alignment, leading to an 'agree to disagree' approach that constrains the bloc's transformative potential.

This pattern might be called tempered incremental revisionism. BRICS pushes for change, but usually within a framework of pragmatic adaptation. The true measure of its success will be leveraging its expanded platform to move from lowest-common-denominator positions to more cohesive collective actions, turning a necessary adaptive posture into a springboard for more profound structural change in global governance.

BRICS expansion represents a sophisticated middle path, one in which the bloc is working within the system while incrementally transforming it, accepting structural constraints while creating space for autonomous action, and balancing cooperation with established powers while building South-South partnerships. This approach yields neither dramatic short-term changes in global power distribution nor revolutionary systemic transformation, but its cumulative impact, it is here argued, represents a significant evolution of the international order.

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