

# ***BRICS Group Announces New Members, Expanding Its Reach***

Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia have been invited to join the club of emerging nations, strengthening its role as a geopolitical alternative to Western-led forums.



**By David Pierson and Lynsey Chutel**

Lynsey Chutel reported from the BRICS summit in Johannesburg. David Pierson reported from Hong Kong.

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The BRICS club of emerging nations — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — was at a crossroads when its leaders arrived in South Africa earlier this week for their annual summit.

Should it follow the path of more moderate members like India and try to work within the Western-dominated global system? Or should it tack toward China by adding new members that would signal stricter opposition to the United States?

On Thursday, the bloc revealed its decision, adding six new countries, including the staunchly anti-Western Iran, in an apparent victory for Beijing.

The inclusion of Tehran tilts the bloc more in opposition to China's chief rival, the United States, and signals that Chinese pressure largely outweighed the qualms of India and Brazil, which want to maintain friendly ties with the West.

"Iran, obviously, is a complicated choice," said Cobus van Staden, a researcher with the China Global South Project. "I can imagine that some of the other members worry that it might increase geopolitical tensions with Western powers, which I think it kind of inevitably would."

The addition of Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia gives the group more financial heft. It also bolsters Beijing's bid to demonstrate to the world that it has growing support for its agenda despite having alienated many countries in the developed world over its ties to Russia.

"This membership expansion is historic," China's top leader, Xi Jinping, said on Thursday at the end of the meeting. "It shows the determination of BRICS countries for unity and cooperation for the broader developing world."

China did not get everything it wanted, however. It had pushed for Indonesia to be invited to the group. The reason for Indonesia's omission was not immediately clear.

Still, the appearance of a success for China may turn out to be the most significant takeaway from the summit, which failed to deliver on the long-stated goal of establishing a BRICS currency to rival the hegemony of the U.S. dollar. The group instead encouraged members to use local currencies in trade.

Another potent symbol of the bloc's limitations appeared each time President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia spoke over a video link. The Russian leader was unable to attend the summit because he is wanted for war crimes in Ukraine under a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court.

The four-day summit underscored how BRICS, which was envisioned as an economic forum, has adopted a more geopolitical bent in the face of a growing great-power rivalry between China and the United States and of Russia's polarizing war in Ukraine.

China and its partners in the bloc are hoping to tap a well of anger and grievance in the so-called Global South to chip away at the West's dominance. Those frustrations include unfulfilled promises by rich countries to deliver Covid-19 vaccines, rising inflation and energy costs and the failure by the Global North to do more to tackle climate change, which disproportionately affects developing countries.

Yet, while BRICS nations may have forged unity outside the confines of the Western-led order, their goals remain divergent and their governance diverse. Come January, when the six new countries join the bloc, BRICS will comprise members representing six democracies, two authoritarian states, two autocratic monarchies and a theocracy.

"The group is going down an uncharted path, with new actors that have varied interests," said Manoj Kewalramani, a China studies fellow at the Takshashila Institution in India. "It's going to become unwieldy and, dare I say, more ineffective."

Some officials disagreed with that assessment, arguing that the countries had proved they could work past their disagreements.

Anil Sooklal, South Africa's representative in the BRICS negotiations, told reporters that the global architecture of Western-dominated institutions was created before emerging nations enjoyed independence and that the group needed to change with the times. "This is what BRICS is saying, 'Let's be more inclusive,'" he said. "BRICS is not anti-West."

That echoes longstanding complaints from China about having so little say in setting global rules given its size.

The acronym BRIC was coined by economists at Goldman Sachs to describe a group of developing nations with rapidly growing economies and populations. It was adopted by the group in 2009, adding an uppercase "S" to the acronym after South Africa joined a year later.

It is now a formalized group that seeks to challenge Western-led forums like the Group of 7, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.



Mr. Xi, China's leader, praised the expansion of membership. Pool photo by Gianluigi Guercia

It has drawn support from smaller countries that are caught between the world's wealthier nations and face pressure to pick sides or, in some cases, occupy a middle ground in an effort to extract the best deal from competing powers.

"The entire Global South is feeling the constraints, the limits of the current system and looking for other options," said Mr. van Staden.

But the inclusion of Iran complicates that picture.

Iran applied to join BRICS in June as part of its efforts to strengthen economic and political ties with non-Western powers and to demonstrate that the West's efforts to isolate the country have failed. Holding the world's second-largest gas reserves and a quarter of the oil reserves in the Middle East, Iran has stayed afloat by selling discounted oil to China, among other maneuvers.

Amid the Ukraine war, Tehran has formed a deepening strategic relationship with the Kremlin, as its prowess in drone and missile production and hostile relations with the West have made it an appealing partner to some nations. The United States has described Iran as Russia's top international military backer and has warned about the impact of the countries' military trade on Ukraine.

On Thursday, Mohammad Jamshidi, Iran's vice president for politics, called the country's accession to the group a "historic achievement and a strategic victory" and congratulated Iran's leadership and people.

Leading up to the summit, American officials had sought to play down the impact of the group's expansion plans. On Tuesday, Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser, told reporters that the Biden administration was "not looking at the BRICS as evolving into some kind of geopolitical rival to the United States or anyone else."

He said that the United States had "strong positive" relations with Brazil, India and South Africa, adding: "We will continue to manage our relationship with China, and we will continue to push back on Russia's aggression."

Some analysts said the dozens of countries that expressed interest in joining BRICS should be a warning sign for the West.

"The enthusiasm of many developing countries to join BRICS reflects not only the appeal of China's values-neutral globalization but also the failure of Western countries to build a more inclusive international order," said Neil Thomas, a fellow on Chinese politics at the Asia Society Policy Institute's Center for China Analysis.

Despite a public show of unity at the tightly controlled conference, the BRICS members brought competing views on expansion. China had pushed to go ahead rapidly, seeing in the grouping a platform to challenge American power. Several leaders pushed back, warning against a return to a divisive global order reminiscent of the Cold War.

Mr. Xi, in a speech read by a subordinate at the summit earlier this week, had said: "International rules must be written and upheld jointly by all countries, rather than dictated by those with the strongest muscles."

Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said he favored expanding the BRICS' access to capital. South Africa, the smallest economy, lobbied for greater African representation.



An oil tank farm in Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the BRICS club's biggest trading partner in the Middle East. Christophe Viseux for The New York Times

Some of the countries that were invited to join have considerable practice walking a fine diplomatic line with the West. Saudi Arabia, the BRICS club's biggest trading partner in the Middle East, has cultivated ties with China and has demonstrated independence from American interests despite its longstanding security relationship with the United States.

Egypt, politically and geographically straddling Africa and the Middle East, has built strong relationships with Russia and China while maintaining its ties to the United States.

The United Arab Emirates, which was also invited as a formal member, had already joined the BRICS' New Development Bank in June.

Edward Wong contributed reporting from Washington and Isabella Kwai from London.

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