

How Should the West Respond to the BRICS? November 19, 2024

***Leslie Elliott Armijo* argues that the West should view the BRICS as part of an inevitable process of global power rebalancing.**

On October 22-24, the BRICS, a multilateral club composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, sent their leaders to Kazan, Russia for the group's 16th annual summit. Also in attendance were four new member states, senior leaders from over 30 additional nations, and UN Secretary General António Guterres. Russian President Vladimir Putin, prevented from attending last year's BRICS Johannesburg summit in person due to an outstanding arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC), proclaimed the ample turnout an endorsement of himself and Russian policies.

Among the attendees were Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, a newly-inducted full member of the club, and BRICS aspirant Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Meanwhile, young North Korean conscripts on their way to fight in Ukraine headed West across Siberia, widening the war and provoking US President Biden to remove restraints on Ukraine's use of US-supplied missiles to hit Russia. Although the BRICS+ summit made few headlines in Anglophone North America, and only slightly more in Europe and Japan, some in the West's foreign policy community have expressed alarm at the growth of this coalition.

How should the West respond? I argue that, in the short-run, the best reaction is calm coupled with sustained curiosity about the phenomenon of a viable club of geographically-diverse rising powers, united mainly by a desire to oppose Western dominance over global institutions, markets, and territory. Over the medium-run, the United States and the West must accept that they live in an increasingly multipolar world.

The West should avoid folding the BRICS into loose talk of the "axis of evil." The BRICS club is disparate, combining democrats and dictators, and an aspiring superpower with a heterogeneous set of major and middle powers. Leaders of several members barely speak, including the new dyad of Egypt and Ethiopia. Although Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi settled some contentious border issues immediately prior to this summit, cofounders China and India still have a tense relationship. China is first among "equals," yet the others are not without influence. India vetoed Turkey, which was, however, permitted to join the list of thirteen "partner" countries announced at the summit. Brazil nixed Venezuela's application to join the partners list, which it had previously supported. Host Putin hoped for an endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but did not get it. Putin's other priority was to move forward on establishing alternative international financial arrangements to help Russia, Iran, and possibly China in the future resist Western financial and trade sanctions. Although the summit communique readily decried sanctions, concrete action on de-dollarization of intra-BRICS transfers lagged, despite pre-summit discussions among the members of Russia's plans for a BRICS currency, credit card, digital central bank currencies, and RMB-denominated oil

pricing. Besides Russia, the “non-China” BRICS do not wish to substitute renminbi for dollar hegemony, although they are willing to consider multiple currencies. Meanwhile, the summit hosts had to advise attendees to bring dollars or euros in cash, as credit cards and ATM withdrawals would not work due to Western sanctions.

But parsing only the details of the summit’s outcomes misses its real significance. Here are three observations on the bigger picture. First, “global power shift” is not simply a Russian or Chinese trope. Economic size (GDP in purchasing power parity terms or the equivalent) is the simplest proxy for relative national power capabilities. As shown in the table, in 1950, following the Second -World War, the US was the world’s largest economy, approximately three times the size of the USSR, the second largest. Of the top twenty economies, fourteen were either European (excluding the USSR) or Anglo-European settler colonies (US, Canada, and Australia). Of the remaining six, Japan has since joined the political West while the five others (USSR/Russia, China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil) were and remain the largest powers outside the advanced industrial core, all now self-identifying with the global South. By 1998, China’s economy had expanded to half that of the US, while emerging market economies Mexico, South Korea, Turkey, and Argentina displaced four smaller European countries on the top twenty list. By 2023, China’s economy was 25 percent larger than the US,’ and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran had surpassed two more European countries and Australia, which also fell off the list.

Table 1. Top Twenty Countries by Economic Size

(gross domestic product, in millions of 1990 international dollars for 1950 and 1998, and in millions of dollars at purchasing power parity for 2023)

	GDP 1950		GDP 1998		GDP 2023	
1	*US	1,456	*US	7,395	*China	34,644
2	*USSR	518	*China	3,873	*US	27,361
3	*UK	348	Japan	2,540	India	14,537
4	Germany	265	India	1,703	Japan	6,252
5	*China	240	Germany	1,460	Germany	5,858
6	India	222	*France	1,115	*Russia	6,452
7	*France	220	*UK	1,109	Brazil	4,457
8	Italy	165	Italy	1,023	Indonesia	4,333
9	Japan	161	Brazil	927	*France	4,169
10	Canada	102	*Russia	665	*UK	4,026
11	Spain	67	Mexico	656	Turkey	3,767
12	Indonesia	66	Indonesia	627	Italy	3,453
13	Poland	61	Canada	623	Mexico	3,289
14	Netherlands	61	South Korea	564	So. Korea	2,794
15	Australia	61	Spain	560	Spain	2,553
16	Brazil	53	Turkey	423	Canada	2,469
17	Belgium	47	Australia	382	Saudi A.	2,032
18	Sweden	47	Argentina	334	Egypt	2,121
19	Czechoslovakia	43	Netherlands	318	Iran	1,598
20	Switzerland	42	Austria	153	Poland	1,815

* Permanent five in UNSC

New to top twenty economies in 1998

New to top twenty economies in 2023

Sources:

1950 and 1998 from Angus Maddison, *The World Economy*, using GDP in 1990 international Geary-Khamis dollars; 2023 from World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, using GDP at purchasing power parity.

Other, arguably more sophisticated, alternative power indices alter the details of this story, but not the conclusions. Some US-based scholars and North American policymakers will counter by reciting other dimensions in which the US and its allies dominate, including nuclear weaponry or currency power. Yet, if leaders are rational, only nuclear deterrence capability matters, not total warheads. And there many reasons why other nations are now looking to challenge the continuing hegemony of the US dollar, as the BRICS have done for a decade.

Second, China (both assisted and hampered by Russia) is playing a long game of global expansion. The BRICS' 2023 decision to welcome six countries as new full members—Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—reflected the geostrategic ambitions of China and Russia to contest Western dominance of crucial supply-chain and transportation routes centered in the Middle East (“West Asia”), including the overland route through the Caspian Sea, Iran, and the Persian Gulf as well as the sea route through the Red Sea into the Eastern Mediterranean. The invitation to Argentina, the only clear democracy among the six, came at the insistence of Brazil, but was reversed by Argentina’s subsequent election of a radical free-market libertarian as president, who withdrew the country’s application. Saudi Arabia, cautious about its signaling and uneasy over widening Mideast War, is “studying” the issue.

Third, the hubris of Western governments rankles states and citizens in the global South, as when US leaders claim they alone occupy the high ground of democracy, rule of law, and moral courage. Consider the issue of climate change, for which Western and especially US leaders resist accepting historical responsibility or even calculating current obligations based on per capita energy usage or environmental damage. Or look to the Mideast. The BRICS unanimously endorse a two-state solution and 1967 borders for Israel and Palestine, and call for an immediate ceasefire in the current conflicts. At the same time, the BRICS merely “acknowledge” South Africa’s genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and they also decline to endorse Russia’s war in Ukraine, noting that member countries follow their own “national positions.” At a deeper level, these contending perspectives are rooted in fundamentally different perceptions in the global North and South of the primary sources of Western/Northern economic success and military dominance. Whereas commentators in the global North tend to emphasize merit and the Protestant work ethic, many observers in the global South see the history of colonialism, slavery, exploitation, and persistent biases in postwar global economic governance as key elements in accounting for Western preeminence.

Based on these observations, Western political leaders have three broad options for responding to the rise of the BRICS and the global South more generally: 1) a new Cold War to restore Western dominance, 2) agreeing to a fundamental rebalancing within the existing peak institutions of global governance, and 3) continuing to muddle through, while tolerating parallel international configurations and institutions that they do not control.

The New Cold War option has clear roots in US President Donald Trump’s first administration’s “America First” and “Make America Great Again” doctrine, although President Trump’s friendly encounters with Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim

Jung Un sometimes blurred the lines. Despite the softer rhetoric of the successor administration of President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, both the economic and national security components of Trump's policies largely remained in place. Secretary Blinken begins a recent *Foreign Affairs* article with a reference to a "small number of countries"—Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China—"determined to alter the foundational principles of the international system." Blinken criticizes Europeans who, prior to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, naively viewed China "primarily as an economic partner." Happily, in Blinken's view, most European leaders subsequently understood that China is a "systemic rival" and Russia a foe. The logic of this approach recommends that the US "near-shore" its production chains, modernize its weapons, and stonewall any criticism of its foreign policies. In Trump's second term, assisted by Republican control of both houses of the US Congress, he also promises to withdraw or heavily condition US political and financial support for multilateral governance institutions established at the close of the Second World War.

The primary motivation for Western states to shift to the second option of fundamental rebalancing is that the advanced industrial democracies need workable relations with large powers in the global South. Rebalancing means genuinely incorporating newly powerful states such as India, Brazil, Turkey, and Indonesia, long-excluded regions such as the African continent, and nations that the West mistrusts including Russia, Iran, and Cuba, within existing peak global governance organizations. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the United Nations rest on universality, but also on implicitly reflecting the global balance of power. The 1947 allocation of veto power over UN Security Council decisions exclusively to the five victors of the Second World War (US, USSR/Russia, UK, France, and China) reflected the international power balance at the time, but has since been impossible to reform. Even the modest redistribution of "chairs and shares" within the IMF and World Bank over time has required enormous effort, including collective pressure from the BRICS, for incremental and insufficient change. Rebalancing may be needed to address the truly common challenges of climate change, pandemics, and avoiding nuclear war as a global community, but it is very hard to achieve. Sadly, it may require an acute crisis.

For example, as meltdowns in major banks in the US and UK reverberated across the global North in September and October 2008, European leaders urged US President George W. Bush to convene the first leaders' summit of the Group of Twenty (G20), previously a technical working group on financial architecture. Only the G20, whose members included both the major advanced industrial democracies and the four original BRICs, had the collective clout to hammer out an exit strategy, necessarily including coordinated stimulus packages from the largest economies in both the global North and global South. The BRICS then employed that opportunity to organize their own first leaders' summit in Russia in April 2009, and to bargain jointly with the political West within and outside the G20 for changes in global financial institutions and rules. The G20, of course, remains an ad hoc summit process, not a permanent multilateral institution with career staff and a fixed address.

Fundamental rebalancing also means that Western leaders implicitly accept that the de facto aims of the peak global institutions in the near term will become less "liberal," in the

sense of promoting Western priorities such as minority and gender rights, free and competitive elections, and freedom of speech and travel. Instead, they will be more “Westphalian,” dedicated to resolving joint international problems of war, peace, and human survival, while respecting the sovereignty of incumbent leaders over their domestic political systems. This acceptance represents a significant retrenchment from early post-Cold War Western ambitions.

The third option means the political West continuing along the current path of muddling through with only incremental rebalancing in the peak global governance institutions, while also accepting that emerging powers will create parallel clubs and institutions, which the West does not control and may find distasteful due to an abundance of "anti-Western" rhetoric and symbolism. Thus, the BRICS club (rising powers all disgruntled with the West, united by their "common aversion" to being underrepresented in dominant global institutions) should be understood as a means of broadening participation in global governance, since the existing international organizations will not incorporate rising powers meaningfully. In this view, US and Western policymakers need to tolerate non-alignment rhetoric in traditional allies such as Turkey and “productive incoherence” in global problem-solving. The global North has long fielded its own multilateral clubs and caucuses, including the Group of Seven (G7) and the larger and more formalized Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), legitimately restricting membership to like-minded market democracies.

Meanwhile, despite their efforts to talk the talk of global-South solidarity, Russia and China also often annoy other countries through their own authoritarian high-handedness...and the US and the political West would be smart to stand aside and let this play out. Interestingly, the region of the global South least troubled by Western hypocrisy is Southeast Asia, where geopolitical realism among China’s close neighbors about the motives of all large powers prevails. The West can, in this scenario, retain de facto if diminishing steering capacity in the main postwar global institutions, while welcoming cordial partnerships with Mexico, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, India, Colombia, Chile, and many others practicing “active non-alignment.”

In my view, those in the political West who value liberal democracy as the least-bad set of national political institutions should select some combination of doors two and three. This means, first, greater incorporation of the global South into existing universal membership international institutions, and, second, an attitude of flexible but attentive tolerance toward the BRICS+ club and its partners and aspirants. The on-going global power shift, led by China, is a structural reality of the international system, and there is little the West can do about this, even with all-out pushback and confrontation, as some in Washington, D.C. are considering. This shift is gradually redistributing power capabilities and agency away from the major advanced industrial democracies and toward a disparate group of emerging powers. The West’s best response options to the expanded BRICS rest on remembering that carrots, especially no-fault carrots extended to democracies and partial democracies identifying with the global South, are always more enticing than sticks.

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