

Research Article

The Cohesion of BRICS is being Tested

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Abstract

This article examines the emerging challenges affecting cohesion within BRICS amid evolving geopolitical tensions, particularly concerning developments involving Iran, the Gulf States, and major global powers. Using qualitative policy analysis and secondary-source review, the study evaluates how differing strategic interests among BRICS members influence the bloc's ability to maintain a unified position on international security issues. The article argues that while BRICS continues to promote multipolarity and reform of global governance institutions, internal geopolitical divergences increasingly challenge organizational cohesion. The findings suggest that BRICS faces significant obstacles in balancing national interests with collective objectives, thereby affecting its effectiveness as an alternative platform in global governance.

Introduction

The BRICS platform was established at a meeting of Brazil, Russia, India, and China in June 2009, with South Africa joining in 2010. In January 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran joined as members, thereby augmenting the group's power. Saudi Arabia became a full member later on. BRICS leaders convene annually to enhance economic and geopolitical collaboration, seeking to establish a coalition that challenges Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The group advocates for a multipolar world in which emerging nations may assert their interests and influence global power dynamics, including reforms to the UN Security Council [1,8,12,24,30].

The geopolitical context of BRICS has grown more intricate, especially following military operations by the United States (US) and Israel against Iran in June 2025 and subsequent developments in early 2026. These incidents have underscored considerable intra-group difficulties among BRICS members [13,15,25]. The ongoing war in Ukraine has exacerbated tensions within the organization, as some members have taken measures that deviate from BRICS's core principles. India's relations with the US have significantly strengthened. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Israel and the conclusion of a significant trade agreement with the US have raised concerns about India's commitment to BRICS. If India aligns more closely with US frameworks, it may intensify impressions of a fragmented Global South,

especially if other BRICS members opt not to interact with the US. Indonesia has emulated India's strategy by establishing a trade deal with the US and participating in President Trump's Board of Peace, complicating BRICS dynamics, particularly with China, Russia, and Iran. The latter has increasingly been blamed for its missile and drone assaults on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, its two fellow members in BRICS.

The absence of a coordinated reaction from BRICS about the assaults on and by Iran has prompted inquiries into the group's credibility and unity. The lack of cooperation in response to aggression towards a member state weakens BRICS's declared objective of fighting US hegemony [7,13,21]. The group's varied interests and viewpoints complicate efforts to reach agreement, especially on difficult matters such as military interventions and sovereignty.

As tensions escalated, the internal dynamics of BRICS revealed growing ambivalence among its members [15,25,26]. Certain states are using the situation to promote further security cooperation, but others continue to manage their ties with Washington and Beijing. This split jeopardizes BRICS's status as a unified alternative to Western-led institutions. The military operations against Iran may have intensified these splits, forcing members to address challenging questions about their capacity to foster a new world order in the absence of ideological cohesion.

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The ramifications for the future of BRICS are substantial [20,21,26]. The military operations against Iran may expedite a restructuring of global alliances, as nations contend with the tension between their economic ties to the US and their ambitions for a multipolar world. The humanitarian rhetoric of Brazil, India's military acquisitions favoring Israel, and China's pragmatic attitude exemplify the difficulty of sustaining a cohesive front within BRICS.

The predominant impact of the US continues to be a vital element in determining the trajectory of BRICS [8,9,17]. Although the Bloc may deliberate on ambitious ideas such as de-dollarization, the reality of US economic dominance and its capacity to impose sanctions hamper these endeavors. The absence of institutional cohesion within BRICS impedes its ability to respond effectively to external forces, making it susceptible to disunity.

Ultimately, BRICS faces the challenge of re-establishing its relevance in a rapidly evolving global environment. The Group must manage the delicate balance between fostering collaboration among its members and addressing conflicting interests that threaten its cohesion. In the absence of a unified approach and a commitment to reciprocal assistance, BRICS may remain a loosely structured coalition rather than a significant alternative to Western institutions. The future of BRICS will hinge on its capacity to resolve internal conflicts and demonstrate cohesion in the face of external challenges. That test soon came.

Methodology

Research design

This study uses a qualitative geopolitical policy-analysis approach to examine factors [5,19,24] that affect cohesion within BRICS as regional and global security dynamics evolve. The analysis looks at how national interests, strategic alignments, and institutional goals interact within the BRICS framework. Given the complex and fast-changing nature of international relations, a qualitative design is the best choice for assessing the political, diplomatic, and security-related developments that shape the organization's internal cohesion.

Data sources

The study relies on a thorough review of secondary data from various sources, including official BRICS statements, government announcements, diplomatic communications, policy reports, academic literature, and credible international media. Additional context comes from publicly available analyses on BRICS expansion, regional security developments, and the foreign policy positions of member countries.

To ensure analytical consistency, preference went to reliable and verifiable sources that shed light on interstate relations, multilateral cooperation, and geopolitical trends relevant to BRICS.

Analytical framework

The analysis uses thematic content analysis to spot patterns affecting BRICS cohesion. Four key areas are emphasized:

1. Differences in national strategic interests among members
2. Security and geopolitical conflicts involving BRICS countries
3. Institutional ability for collective decision-making
4. The effects of BRICS expansion on organizational unity

Data from various sources were compared and interpreted to assess how recent developments support or challenge the organization's ability to hold a unified political stance.

Theoretical perspective

The study draws mainly from Realist and Multipolarity views in international relations [8,10,14,24]. Realism indicates that states focus on national interests, security needs, and strategic independence, even within cooperative groups. Meanwhile, Multipolarity theory offers a lens to view BRICS as a rising coalition that aims to foster a more balanced global power distribution and better representation for developing economies.

Using these perspectives helps analyze whether BRICS members can uphold collective goals despite their differing national priorities and regional security issues.

Scope and limitations

The analysis centers on current geopolitical developments influencing BRICS cohesion, particularly regarding interactions among member states and their responses to regional security challenges. Since the study mainly depends on secondary sources and policy analysis, its conclusions should be seen in light of the available public information and the changing landscape of international affairs.

Results

The Foreign Ministers of the Group convened in India on 14 and 15 May 2026. Abbas Araghchi of Iran attended. The Chinese Foreign Minister was absent from the meeting in New Delhi because he was in Beijing for President Trump's meeting with President Xi. The *Economic Times of India*, on 12 May 2026, describes this as "an intriguing development in global diplomacy." Compounding this intrigue was that China designated its ambassador in Delhi as its envoy, rather than dispatching a vice foreign minister or a Politburo-level official. In diplomatic etiquette, substituting an in-country ambassador for the foreign minister at a ministerial conference represents a significant downgrade in status, though couched in terms of logistics and ongoing commitment.



China's decision to reduce its diplomatic presence in Delhi indicated that, in the short term, Beijing was prioritizing its relationship with President Trump over allocating political resources to a more complex BRICS, particularly on contentious matters such as the conflict in Iran. That time, it emphasized China's intention to maintain BRICS as a symbolic entity while relegating it to a strategically subordinate role, alongside the Bloc's increasing challenges in achieving unified action during critical security crises, such as the situation in Iran. The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasized that China highly values BRICS and endorses India's leadership and the Greater BRICS initiative, indicating an effort to mitigate perceptions of demotion. The lack of a senior delegate indicates a trend. China's president and senior officials have begun either to absent themselves from some BRICS meetings or to delegate deputies, which is often interpreted as an indication that BRICS has diminished in significance as a premier diplomatic platform for Beijing, even as Beijing continues to regard BRICS as a symbol of Global South solidarity. Moreover, some observers argue that this indicates a recalibration on China's part. This development may allow other actors – India, as this year's chair, together with Russia and significant new members such as Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia – to influence perceptions, possibly steering BRICS in ways that may not quite coincide with Beijing's wishes. In summary, China's actions reveal rather than instigate BRICS disunity.

That disunity within BRICS was already evident during an earlier deputy-level conference in New Delhi. The initiative disintegrated without a unified declaration following a public confrontation between the UAE and Iran over the conflict in West Asia, highlighting how the expanded membership directly integrates regional rivalry into BRICS. That rivalry is set to boil over in Delhi during the Foreign Ministers' meeting.

The Wall Street Journal reported on 12 May 2026 that the UAE had conducted military attacks on Iran. In early April 2026, the UAE conducted military operations against Iranian territory, including an assault on an oil facility located on Lavan Island in the Persian Gulf. The recent assaults, unacknowledged by Abu Dhabi, allegedly aimed at Iranian energy facilities and were characterized as indicative of a more assertive Emirati readiness to employ force to safeguard its economic interests and regional dominance. Iran has targeted all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including assaults on military installations of the United States and civilian infrastructure, such as airports and oil facilities. Iran's aerial assault on its Gulf neighbours has been focused on the UAE, with over 2,800 missiles and drones deployed against UAE territory – surpassing any other nation.

The assaults referenced in the WSJ report undoubtedly exacerbated bilateral tensions during the meeting. It intensified pre-existing divisions and steered the group towards minimal consensus outcomes and meticulously crafted communiqués, rather than overt disunity. Still, the Delhi summit faced a

tangible intra-BRICS security dilemma rather than an abstract discourse on “West Asia tensions.”

Iran had significant motivations to utilize the BRICS platform to denounce assaults on its land, characterize them as infringements of sovereignty, and associate them with overarching critiques of US-aligned military operations in the area. The UAE, in contrast, adhered to its official stance that it possessed the right to respond to hostile actions, citing recurrent Iranian missile and drone assaults on its territory as justification.

The UAE's aggressive actions against Iran are particularly noteworthy as they signify the implementation of its commitment to join the US and Israel in action. The Saudi decision to attack Iran highlights the severity of the threat that Saudi Arabia perceives from Iran and the necessity for an aggressive response to prevent future Iranian assaults. Saudi Arabia's participation underscores the escalation of the conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically been regional adversaries, vying for dominance throughout the Middle East.

India, alongside Russia and China as principal agenda-setters, sought to compartmentalize the dispute, directing discussions toward neutral topics such as de-escalation, general respect for sovereignty, and the necessity of regional dialogue, rather than allowing the explicit identification of either party in official conclusions.

Even before the current crisis in the Gulf, observers had noted that the enlarged BRICS comprises nations with differing threat assessments and security alignments, complicating the establishment of a cohesive position on conflicts such as the Iran war. The concurrent inclusion of former regional adversaries – namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – posed a challenge to efforts to determine whether BRICS could harmonize conflicting Middle Eastern security priorities within a unified framework. The WSJ disclosures intensify the underlying tension by exposing two members of BRICS covertly acting against a third member, while the latter publicly assaults its Gulf neighbors.

The ongoing issue about Iran has shown significant internal discord within BRICS. This difference illustrates pre-existing asymmetries: the military collaboration between Russia and Iran, along with China's energy ties to Iran, stands in contrast to the close security alliances that India and the Gulf monarchies have with the US, as well as their apprehensions about Iranian power projection. Consequently, the conflict in Iran has failed to provide a cohesive BRICS stance. Conversely, it has exacerbated intra-bloc divisions, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Commentaries on the Iran conflict openly contend that the crisis challenges BRICS and exposes its limitations, emphasizing that the Group is not equipped to function as a security framework, thereby permitting members to adopt

selective and at times contradictory policies under a vague cover. For the other members of the Group, witnessing a breakup between three members may be an uncomfortable situation, compounded by the challenge of determining whom to support or denounce. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia and the UAE positions BRICS as an energy powerhouse closely aligned with Washington. Their participation in military action against a fellow member undermines BRICS' self-portrayal as a proponent of peaceful multipolarity.

The meeting in Delhi undoubtedly strengthened the belief, particularly in Western discourse, that BRICS stands more united in its criticism of Western hegemony than in any cohesive security framework. Cohesion within BRICS is declining, with some observers claiming it may be at risk of collapse. This dynamic challenges India's position as chair, particularly with a leaders' meeting planned for late 2026. The internal disputes are expected to be emphasized during this meeting.

BRICS has always championed the reform of global governance and the augmentation of representation for the Global South in international organizations. The inability to reach consensus on essential matters, such as the use of force and the protection of civilians in war, diminishes its capacity to formulate unified rules. As a result, BRICS seems incapacitated, operating mostly as a discussion forum rather than an efficient crisis-management organization, thereby perpetuating the impression of indecisiveness and irrelevance on security issues.

In the following articles, I discuss the above in depth.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the BRICS is entering a more complicated stage of its development. Although the organization continues to chase common goals such as multipolarity, reform of global governance institutions, and better representation of developing countries, recent geopolitical developments have demonstrated the great differences among its members.

The frictions among Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE demonstrate the difficulties that emerge when states with competing regional interests operate within the same multilateral architecture. Instead of offering a coherent response to these developments, BRICS seemed to be stymied by the diverging strategic priorities of its members. It shows the difficulty of political unity in a more diverse organisation.

The study also finds that national interests are still a decisive factor in the behaviour of BRICS members. They are part of broader strategic considerations that sometimes trump common BRICS positions. China's diplomatic position, India's growing relationship with the United States, and the security interests of Gulf members. These findings are consistent with

the realists in international relations who contend that states care ultimately about national interests and security concerns.

But the results are not necessarily the failure of BRICS. Rather, they suggest that the organization could evolve into a broader and more inclusive platform, where consensus is achieved in a selective rather than uniform manner. As membership grows, the problem of keeping the members together will probably require stronger institutional mechanisms and more diplomatic activity among the members.

The paper identifies a basic dilemma facing BRICS: the clash of national interests and common aspirations. The future impact of the organization may depend on its capacity to manage internal disagreements, yet still offer a credible alternative voice in global governance.

Conclusion

The study finds that BRICS faces increasing challenges to cohesion due to differing strategic interests, regional security disputes, and varying external partnerships among member states. Although the bloc remains an important platform for promoting multipolarity and Global South representation, internal divisions may limit its effectiveness in addressing major geopolitical crises. Future research should examine whether institutional reforms within BRICS can strengthen collective decision-making while accommodating member-state diversity.

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