



# Op-ed

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## From a “BRICS-Centric” to a “BRICS-Infused” world order

### Introduction

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) in the Department of Political Sciences hosted a roundtable discussion on a “BRICS-infused world order”. This discussion featured a presentation by Sanusha Naidu, a senior researcher at the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD), and Dr. Yu-Shan Wu, a researcher of the ORP, who acted as a respondent. The discussion was followed by a vibrant debate in which several key questions and points emerged. The following op-ed details the main points made by both Naidu and Wu and ends with a reflection on some of the key points that emerged during the discussion.

### Sanusha Naidu - Presenter

The overarching theme of the roundtable was the question of whether a “BRICS-centric world order” is emerging, or whether it is more accurate to refer to a “BRICS-infused world order”. When BRICs (and then later BRICS) first emerged, it appeared as though it was creating a BRICS-centric world. This was especially evident after the first summit in Russia in 2009 when the BRICS called for increased economic reform, especially in light of the [global domination](#) of the US dollar. However, considerable time has passed since then, including the expansion of the BRICS to include [five new members](#) as of 1 January 2024 and this calls for a re-examination of whether a BRICS-centric world order is what the BRICS countries are aiming to achieve.

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According to Naidu, a good starting point is the understanding that the BRICS is not necessarily about challenging and recreating the world order, but rather about creating a kind of fluidity in the international system that allows states the ability to access and engage in the system. In this world order, a state no longer needs to be confined to one set of institutions. Importantly, however, this does not imply a complete rejection of the Western liberal-centric world order.

In a point supported by Wu later in the discussion, Naidu proposes that the Western liberal-centric world order still seems to have a particular appeal to the BRICS countries. Consequently, a “BRICS-infused world order” is emerging that is not defined by an overhaul of the international system but rather a reconfiguration of the system. A “BRICS-infused world order” is used to describe how the BRICS countries are influencing and reshaping the global order. In such a world order, engagement is happening within particular regional neighbourhoods, in what Naidu labels as ‘decentralised operations.’ A further distinguishing feature of this “BRICS-infused world order” is the notion of “a desire for reform, but reform is not a necessity if it's not wanted.” That is, it is a multilateral system that is both about reform, and paradoxically, not about reform, at the same time.

Along with these characteristics, Naidu further elaborated on three distinguishing features of the “BRICS-infused world order”. The first one is vertical engagement (the “top-down” approach). For the BRICS, this includes deliberating on questions such as how capacity is built and how one defrays costs and underwrites risks. This perhaps surfaces quite prominently in the regional dimension in the Middle East. If one considers Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, their geographical neighbourhood is a regional block that includes capacity not only in terms of the political and economic but also in terms of security (security both in the traditional sense, but also in terms of the socioeconomic security of resources). Even where there are competing states, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the important aspect is that the expansion of the BRICS allows states to be part of something they were once excluded from.

The second element of this BRICS-infused world order is the horizontal relationship (the “intra-BRICS engagement”). Here, there are both convergences and divergences. Convergences can be found in forums such as the BRICS Business Council, the BRICS Parliamentary Forum, and the BRICS Youth Forum. In fact, it is difficult to keep track of the many engagements of these working groupings and streams amongst BRICS members. But then there is also the divergent aspect. This is where interests tend to lead to alternatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that includes some of the BRICS members, viz. China, Russia and India (and from 2024, Iran), or a trilateral grouping, such as IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa). Furthermore, the fact that there are no criteria for inclusion into the

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BRICS leads to many speculative narratives about why certain countries joined or were invited to join but did not. The current lack of criteria means that there are no principles underlying BRICS membership and the process itself is very much up in the air.

The third characteristic is the bottom-up approach. According to Naidu, this approach is about how one deals with the regional dimensions. The idea of cooperation within regional blocks, as alluded to earlier, is becoming increasingly interesting, especially in Southeast Asia. Another aspect to consider is the importance of BRICS membership to countries such as Russia. As mentioned in the beginning, the BRICS is about giving states a platform or space to exist, act and project. For Russia, a state that currently has rather few possibilities to pursue its interests in the international arena, the BRICS is thus a vital arena, even more so, considering that Russia is chairing the BRICS in 2024. This raises interesting questions about what kind of countries Russia will put forward as new members during its presidency.

In summary, there are various narratives about the BRICS. Some are dismissive of the BRICS. Others are sceptical, arguing that it will not move forward. Some have argued that the BRICS is really about China and its [vassal entities](#). For Naidu, the key question is asking what iterations BRICS is going to have. It is vital to look at the kind of trajectories that the BRICS are engaging in at the subregional level and to look at the subregional orders. One of the major challenges faced by the BRICS is reconciling the paradox that exists within its current structure. While the BRICS state that they are defined by their diversity and right to disagree, the question can be asked “if a decision doesn’t meet what the five original members want, will they override the other (new/er) members?” Thus, the idea of calling for reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is contradictory because the BRICS have not demonstrated that they are willing to have that same equity within the BRICS (see below).

## Yu-Shan Wu - Respondent

Supporting the ideas put forward by Naidu in the presentation, Wu similarly posits that the BRICS is seeking more of an infusion of the world order, or a seeping of the system as opposed to establishing a “BRICS-centric world order”. The BRICS do not seem to be challenging the architecture of the international system; there are, however, elements of it that need to be reformed. One interesting point made by Wu was that even though the concept of the BRICs, coined in 2001 originally, endured much scepticism, it has not fallen away: in fact, the expansion of the group points to durability.

When looking at the BRICS and discussing whether it will become a “BRICS-centric” or “BRICS-infused world order”, it is important to look at two components, namely

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executive leadership and ideational leadership<sup>1</sup> (this [framework](#) has been applied by scholars in relation to the Indo-Pacific foreign policy concept). In the case of the former, there does seem to be a degree of executive leadership in the sense that the group has established a formal institution with a ‘physical’ presence - the New Development Bank, being funded by member countries that can physically be walked into. However, the ideational aspect is seen by Wu to be the grey area that impedes a “BRICS-centric world order”. Currently, the values and principles being propagated by the BRICS are quite state-centric. In particular, one principle or value being strongly espoused is multipolarity. However, here the question needs to be asked whether multipolarity is truly a BRICS value or whether it is rather simply about looking at existing power structures and how to shift the existing power distribution to other places and poles. When approaching BRICS from an executive-ideational leadership framework, it can be said that BRICS reflects thin institutionalisation, they coordinate on areas of common interest, but sovereignty is not compromised.

A further point raised by Wu was the extent to which the BRICS equate to the Global South. Since the most recent BRICS Summit (2023), it is fair to state that the BRICS has internationalised Global South concerns. However, the BRICS is not the only grouping out there purporting to be representative of the Global South. Other forms of cooperation include the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Here, the question needs to be asked, namely, how does the BRICS interact with such institutions?

In her response, Wu also raised several other questions and points such as the need to critically interrogate each individual member’s purpose and interest in BRICS, as well as how national elections impact the BRICS dynamic (especially considering that several BRICS countries such as South Africa, Iran, and India are heading into election processes this year, while Russia has just held its elections). Along with this, Wu also commented that when looking at the South African epistemic community delegations that attend BRICS summits and meetings there is a relatively high degree of turnover. However, this is not observed in the Indian or Chinese delegations where one generally sees the same voices. This is an important point to consider since a high turnover can impact the institutional memory, as well as a delegation’s ability to have agency or negotiate with other BRICS partners. In conclusion, Wu remarked that when it comes to the multilateral system and especially financial institutions, there is a high degree of coordination between the BRICS countries. However, as one moves away from the international platforms, coordination seems to be less.

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<sup>1</sup> [‘Executive leadership’](#) denotes a state’s capacity to utilise its resources effectively in overcoming practical challenges, while ‘ideational leadership’ refers to individuals’ capacity to introduce novel ideas and suggestions aimed at altering policymakers’ perceptions regarding shared interests in collaboration.

## Discussion

The discussion picked up on some of the key points made during the presentation and response. For example, the claim that the BRICS purport to represent the Global South was problematised, considering the fact that the five founding members of the NDB have a 55 percent share in the New Development Bank (NDB) in perpetuity closely resembles the structure of the permanent five (P5) at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

One theme that was quite prominent in the discussion was that the current global order is based on a distinctly transactional approach. Considering that the BRICS advocate for multilateralism, it will be interesting to see how they reconcile this with transactionalism. On this note, one participant noted that the problem with this transactional approach is that it undermines the project of solidarity that the BRICS purportedly embody. Another participant noted that considering these dynamics, the BRICS only provide an alternative platform for engagement, it does not provide an entirely alternative world order simply because the “big five” in BRICS have not equalised themselves. The debate also broached the question of whether multilateralism and multipolarity can coexist. One viewpoint suggested that multilateralism is a natural outgrowth of multipolarity, where power is not necessarily evenly distributed but can still be shared among multiple actors. Furthermore, there are different currencies of power, which again reinforces the idea that multiple actors can hold power albeit in different quantities. This further introduces the idea of the “unbalanced multiple” - power does not need to be distributed equally.

On the note of power, one participant also suggested that perhaps the traditional definition of power is no longer a prerequisite for having one's voice heard at the table. Here, they suggested that there is a need to look at ‘the power of presence’. Another critique raised was regarding the purpose of BRICS considering the fact that if one compares the membership of the BRICS with the SCO, there is considerable overlap, with China, Russia, India and Iran members of both groupings.

Apart from the above-mentioned there were also a few questions and suggestions made:

- Conducting a comparative analysis between the convergences and divergences between the SCO and the BRICS could provide valuable insights. This is particularly significant because the SCO may have the potential to offer valuable lessons for BRICS.
- To what extent does BRICS play a role in the domestic politics of its member states?



- What influence has BRICS exerted on significant geopolitical flashpoints such as ECOWAS, the Sahel, Sudan, Gaza, and Russia-Ukraine? While individual engagement is evident, what contributions has BRICS made collectively as an organisation? Can we accurately assess the impact of BRICS as a regional entity?
- What is the discernible impact of BRICS on the international system thus far?

## Reflection

The presentations and discussions regarding a “BRICS-infused world order” bring to bear several points that require reflection. Firstly, the distinction between a “BRICS-centric” versus a “BRICS-infused world order” is crucial. This distinction highlights how BRICS countries are not necessarily intent on replacing the existing global order but rather introducing fluidity and new dynamics within the existing order. This could further suggest that the BRICS are focused on pragmatic engagement, as a strategy, rather than outright confrontation. In a sense, this distinction is also important since “BRICS-centric” may create misconceptions or misperceptions about the nature of global governance, namely that the BRICS seek to replace existing institutions and norms with their own agenda. In contrast, “BRICS-infused” may rather clarify that BRICS is part of a broader mosaic of global actors and initiatives.

Secondly, the discussion on the executive and ideational leadership within BRICS reveals a potential source of tension between formal institutionalisation (executive) and ideological coherence (ideational). This also alludes to the difficulties of balancing national interests with the collective aspirations of the BRICS. Thirdly, assessing the BRICS purpose vis-à-vis other regional organisations such as the SCO raises important questions about the redundancy or effectiveness of the BRICS. While this is not to suggest that the two organisations are identical, it does serve as a clarion call to perhaps assess, as mentioned earlier, what the BRICS’ impact has been on the world order thus far. This could also be important, especially with regard to addressing the diverse narratives surrounding BRICS.

Lastly, while the concept of a “BRICS-infused world order” certainly provides an alternative way through which to conceptualise the BRICS, it is, at the same time, crucial to remain critical of the concept itself. This includes asking questions about the extent to which the BRICS have truly been able to create a “BRICS-infused world order”, as well as how a “BRICS-infused world order” is still subject to diverse national interests from member states that can undermine the cohesiveness of such an order.

**Notes:**

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