

Research Brief

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BRICS and Global Order

1. Introduction¹

Since the Russia-Ukraine war erupted in February 2022, there has been heightened discussions about the state and future of the international order. It appears that two opposing perspectives about the current rules-based order (also referred to as the International Liberal Order - ILO) have emerged: those who seek to defend it and those who challenge it (or at least are dissatisfied with how the system perpetuates hegemony and particular interests).

Member countries aligned with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and those aligned to it talk about the [threat](#) of authoritarian regimes, “coming together to challenge the global rules and institutions that underpin peace and stability”.² On the other end of the spectrum, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, [stated](#) that the world is at a turning point, as “the ugly neo-colonial world system has ceased to exist and the multipolar world order is being strengthened”. It is due to such divides exacerbated by the war and the lingering Covid-19 pandemic, that South Africa’s

¹ This research brief was compiled by Dr Yu-Shan Wu and Daniela Marggraff, and edited by Maxi Schoeman within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

² This was further corroborated by Japan’s Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida: that autocrats are challenging international rules and norms in ‘Re-Envisioning the Liberal International Order’, 14 February 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/international-order-what-liberal-democracies-must-do-by-tobias-bunde-and-sophie-eisentraut-2023-02>

Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor, [observed](#): “we no longer share an understanding of the greatest global challenge”.

Beyond these emotive statements, media reporting highlights the pertinent role of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in the creation of a ‘new’ world order, as an ‘alternative to the West’.³ The group has risen to prominence with the 2014 institutionalization of the New Development Bank (NDB), which challenges traditional financial institutions such as the World Bank. More recently, their joint dissatisfaction over the use of unilateral sanctions by the United States (US) and its allies towards Russia, has resonated with some members of the Global South who are concerned about facing similar repercussions (also [experienced](#) by Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria) as a result of contesting the established order. Over a dozen states - including Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia, seeking a more [multipolar](#) order, have expressed interest in joining the BRICS, which only reinforces the group’s appeal and prominence in global affairs.

This brief makes a conceptual contribution by exploring the BRICS and the notion of a ‘new’ world order. Guiding questions include: what is the BRICS challenging and what do they see in place of the current order? How does the group interpret ideas of multilateralism, international system and world order, and what are the similarities and differences in their interpretations?

In summary, our findings suggest that beyond the emotive statements that situate the group as a counter to the ‘[rules-based order](#)’, the BRICS are indeed dissatisfied with the current international system but they do not actually seek to dismantle it and replace it with something ‘new’ per se. Rather, they seek to reform and ‘restructure’ it from within.

2. Methodology

To understand how the BRICS view the current international order and the extent they seek to challenge it, a collection of BRICS declarations and speeches was reviewed. The timeframe selected was 2018-2023, which represents a full cycle from when South Africa

³ See for example see: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/brics-and-the-political-economy-of-the-new-world/>, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/opinion/brics-expansion-will-accelerate-creation-of-a-new-world-order-33823bde-beea-4250-8354-1411a5a5a0e5> and <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/brics-nations-offer-a-new-world-order-as-alternative-to-the-west/article66667657.ece>

last chaired the leaders' summit in 2018 to when it is expected to repeat this role in August 2023.

The summit declarations provide a basis for the group's shared (i.e., 'institutionalized') view towards the international system, thus phrases and words associated with the keywords 'multilateralism', 'order' and 'multipolar' were focused on. To add deeper nuance to our analysis, we surveyed 33 official speeches - mainly at the level of president/ prime minister and ministerial level⁴ - to establish how each state expresses their position on the current order or international system. It is through these documents that we can begin to understand how the BRICS collectively (and individually) interprets - through institutions, experiences, sentiment, and discourse - the world and the extent to which they are aligned to the notion of a 'new world order'.

3. Results

3.1 Declarations 2018-2022

Table 1: BRICS declarations 2018-2022

Date and host	Words and phrases associated with 'multilateralism' and/ or 'international' system	Words and phrases applied with 'order'
2018 South Africa (10th BRICS Summit)	Strengthening; uphold; universal; centrality of the United Nations (UN), the UN Charter and international law; rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open, and inclusive multilateral system. Centrality of the universal collective security system (UN Charter).	Fairer, representative, democratic, equitable and just (Related to political and economic order); cooperation, stability and multipolar
2019 Brazil (11th BRICS Summit)	Strengthen and reform; uphold role of the UN; Greater intra-BRICS cooperation at multilateral fora. Related to international trade: Rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open, free, inclusive, preserve and strengthen, with the WTO at its center.	Multipolar, fair, Just, equitable and representative
2020 Russia	Fair, just, inclusive, equitable and representative; multipolar international system	none

⁴ One speech was referenced that was not at the level of presidential/ministerial level, namely the speech by New Development Bank President, Dilma Rousseff.

(12th BRICS Summit)	sovereign equality of all states, respect for territorial integrity, and mutual respect for interests and concerns. To reinvigorate and reform (namely the UN, the WTO, the WHO, the IMF and other international organizations). Related to multilateral trading system: Transparent, open, inclusive, non- discriminatory, rules-based, as embodied in the WTO.	
2021 India (13th BRICS Summit)	Inclusive, equitable and representative; UN Charter principles and purposes; multipolar international system with the United Nations at its center, based on international law. Strengthen and reform (UN system's relevance depends on ability to adapt and evolve). Sovereign equality of all States, respect for their territorial integrity. Multilateral trading system: Transparent, rules-based, open, inclusive non- discriminatory, the WTO at its core (its necessary and urgent reform which would... preserve the centrality, core values and fundamental principles of the WTO).	none
2022 China (14th BRICS Summit)	Uphold international law norms and principles, UN Charter purposes and principles, UN centrality, strengthen and reform (more responsive, effective, transparent and credible, action-orientated, solution-orientated). Respecting sovereign independence, equality, mutual legitimate interests, maintain peace and security. Commitment to multilateralism (such as World Health Organisation), and strengthen technical multilateral cooperation in health. Multilateral formats and instruments to resolve issues (such as Korean Peninsula and areas such as disarmament, anti-corruption etc.) Multilateral trading system: Open, transparent, inclusive, non-discriminatory and rules-based. As embodied in the WTO. Strengthening the Multilateral Trading System and Reforming the WTO. Building global consensus on economic policies.	None/ No mention multipolar

The selected phrases and words that have been applied in the context of ‘multilateralism’, ‘international system’ and ‘order’ during the period analyzed suggest the following group perspective:

- The BRICS do not make any explicit claims about creating a new world order. Notably, ‘order’ is only mentioned in the 2018 (South Africa) and 2019 (Brazil) declarations and not in any of the subsequent three declarations.
- The group does however disagree with the actual structure of the system but seek to work within it. The words they use in relation to the keywords selected include reinvigorate, strengthen, reform, equitable, effective, rules-based and uphold. The BRICS also seek to reaffirm the principles and centrality of - rather than challenge - bodies such as the UN and its Charter as well as the WTO.
- ‘Multipolar’ is mentioned in all the documents with exception of the 2022 (China) declaration. This suggests that there is a general preference for an international system that is multipolar in nature and is based on principles of equality, fairness and representation.

3.2 Speeches 2018-2022

This section analyses a selection of speeches made by representatives of each BRICS country around the various summits. It is clear by the speeches that each BRICS country continues to reinforce the ideas mentioned above. In [2018](#), China’s President Xi Jinping stated:

the current international order is not a perfect one. But as long as it is rule-based, aims to be equitable and pursues win-win outcomes as its goal, such an international order should not be discarded at will, still less should it be dismantled and rebuilt all over again.

This reinforces that the group intention is not to create a new order but work within the current system. This is corroborated by the other countries’ speeches who emphasize reformed multilateralism and the centrality of the UN. In fact, in [2020](#) former Brazilian foreign minister Ernesto Araújo reiterated that:

reform of the multilateral system is urgent to bring it back to the path of real international cooperation and not super-nationalism by stealth.

There are however nuances in interpretations amongst the five countries with regards to their emphasis within the international system:

Brazil: Pragmatism and Diversity

In attempting to understand Brazil's position, it is important to consider that the country has had at least three presidents⁵ since 2018, and while there is a sense of institutional memory between different administrations, there are differences⁶ between the foreign policy orientations of the respective administrations.

Nevertheless, speeches since 2020 give an indication of Brazil's position and its unique views in comparison to the other countries. The speeches by Brazil's representatives reflect an emphasis on practical solutions. Specifically in [2020](#), it was noted that a source of dissatisfaction with the world order stemmed from the lack of pragmatic solutions that empowered the citizens of states. This sentiment appears to continue under [Lula's](#) administration which is described to be pursuing a practical 'active non-alignment' position - that is condemning the Russian invasion, yet denying the selling of ammunition to Ukraine by states such as Germany, as well as visiting key nations such as the US and China (signalling neutrality) in his first 100 days in office. Closely linked to the notion of 'pragmatic solutions' is the idea of 'self-reliance' which features prominently in Brazil's speeches. For example, in his [2020](#) speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), former Brazilian president Bolsonaro explained that "the pandemic teaches us a major lesson, which is that we cannot possibly depend on just a few nations for the production of essential inputs and means for our survival" (and this theme was further reiterated in [2022](#)).

Moreover, some [speeches](#) stress diversity of respective identities over a 'one-size' fits all homogenous multilateral system (also described as standardization of a 'characterless international society'), which can be remedied by pragmatic cooperation and sovereign dialogue. It seems that Brazil is acutely aware of the differences amongst the BRICS, yet there continues to be emphasis on "the larger picture over punctual differences". A [multipolar](#) world order that reflects the voices and needs of the developing world also continues to be stressed. In fact, [supporting](#) the needs of developing countries was a foundation for the

⁵ Michel Temer (2016-2018); Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022); Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023-current).

⁶ For example, under Bolsonaro, Brazil appeared to shift away from the Global South due to closer relations with Trump, while the administration [under Lula](#) has made it clear that it is resuming the "South-South dimension" of their foreign policy. Also see: <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/how-brics-countries-help-to-define-a-truly-new-world-order/>

creation of the New Development Bank, which Brazil's Dilma Rousseff currently serves as president.

Democracy⁷ is also the most mentioned by Brazil, which states that it is committed to democratization in relation to the opportunities offered by technology, a more democratic South America and with regards to global governance, namely reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Russia: The critic

The speeches by Russia appear, through the choice of [words](#)⁸, to be the most emotive as well as the most critical of a 'West-centric concept of a rules-based world order'. They also happen to single out the United States.

Like Brazil, the Russian speeches state that the current world order does not respect diversity, and similarly [advocates](#) for a world order that allows "the existence of states with different political and social systems, their own national interests and spiritual and moral values" (Russia also notes that policies need to deliver [real benefits](#) to citizens). One of Russia's [primary interests](#) is to advocate for an international system where countries can pursue independent foreign policies and not have other people's values imposed on them. Furthermore, its cooperation with BRICS and associated organisations and financial mechanisms is a basis for delivering real benefits to people and to improve the standard of living. There are some similarities with other members: Like India, one of Russia's interests is to combat terrorism (especially in the [Middle East](#) where it is cooperating with the Syrian Government who is fighting against the Islamic State), while like China, it staunchly condemns the use of sanctions and protectionist policies. The seeking of a multipolar world or system is also mentioned in more than one speech (although it was not raised in the 2020 BRICS declaration, the year Russia chaired). The most significant point of divergence between Russia and other members like Brazil, India, and South Africa, is that it does not explicitly state that it seeks to reform the UNSC.

India: self-reliance and practical solutions

India's stance on the current global world order can best be understood in relation to its pursuit of [strategic autonomy](#), whereby it aims to formulate

⁷ The theme of democracy does not only feature in speeches articulated in relation to BRICS, but also surfaces regularly in Brazil's speeches at the United Nations General Assembly (see [2019](#), [2020](#)) and at other speeches such as at the [World Economic Forum](#).

⁸ Such as labelling sanctions 'illegal' and actions of some as 'selfish'.

and pursue its foreign policy, directly connected to its national interests and without being influenced by other states.

The speeches by India seem to take a middle position and is more subtle than members like Russia in expressing its discontent. The country also takes a more inward-looking approach, highlighting the fact that any interests it has in reforming the current global order, are driven by domestic interests⁹. As with most of its views, India takes a very balanced approach to global issues and opportunities. Even when it comes to discussing the promises of the 4th Industrial Revolution, a theme of South Africa's chair of the BRICS in 2018, India points out that technology has become the [biggest disruptor](#) and that it must be carefully managed. One matter on which India takes a clear stance is the issue of terrorism¹⁰ which is repeatedly mentioned in the documents.

Self-reliance appears to have become a pivotal theme, especially after the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Similarly, India stresses [practical solutions](#) to global problems and this underlies a reason for its [engagement](#) in the BRICS. It sees the BRICS as readily making internal institutional reforms that takes practical steps beyond just dialogue. India, though, places heavy emphasis on the need for the reform of the international system, both the IFIs and the Security Council.

China: the reform-revisionist

China is clear-cut in articulating where its dissatisfaction with the current system lies. In almost every speech since 2018, repeated reference is made to the issues of 'unilateralism' and 'protectionism' (its emphasis on this makes sense considering the 2018-2019 [trade wars](#) between the US and China; yet unlike Russia, it does not identify the US by name). In contrast to these keywords, speeches by Chinese representative's stress words such as 'open' and 'win-win'. While much is said about US-China competition, China's use of words reflects that it sees more opportunity through multilateralism versus challenging the US head-on. China is also clear that it does not want to dismantle the international system, however it seeks to support true multilateralism that does not lead to "[bloc-based](#)" security¹¹. At the same time, the speeches specifically emphasize reform but in relation to the global economic governance

⁹ For example, in 2019, India announced that it has launched its [National Skill Development Mission](#) to address the need to provide technical and vocational skills for the youth.

¹⁰ The emphasis on terrorism can be related to India's border issues with Pakistan, where India argues that Pakistan is [sponsoring militant activity](#) to destabilize areas of the country. In this sense, once again, the domestic imperatives are clearly highlighted as driving India's engagement.

¹¹ An example would be the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#).

system (with the WTO at the centre). China for example, like Russia, does not explicitly call for reform of the UNSC. For China, the greatest [synergy](#), cooperation and promise amongst the BRICS members appear to be in the economic sphere.

This position seems to fit with [Buzan's](#) description of China as a 'reform revisionist', where it accepts some international institutions such as the leading role of the UN (as well as G20) and the Westphalian principle of sovereignty but resists and seeks to reform others where it desires a seat at the table or to rewrite global norms and practises. Notably in 2022, Xi's [speech](#) spoke about supporting greater development of the BRICS New Development Bank that could challenge other institutions.

South Africa: the development agenda

Another state that is dissatisfied with the economic aspect of the international system is South Africa, although its speeches reflect a [stronger developmental agenda](#) compared to China. In practical terms, this involves championing the interests of Africa and the Global South¹², such as giving developing countries greater access to credit and finance, and for example, reforming the debt repayment structure. Since 2020 and the start of the pandemic, there has also been increased emphasis on improving the resilience of supply chains, both nationally and regionally¹³. Incidentally, this emphasis on resilience is coupled to the need for increasing self-reliance, a theme that features prominently in India's speeches. There is also [emphasis](#) on intra-BRICS trade, tourism and investment. South Africa is therefore clear in asserting that the interests of developing countries cannot be neglected, as they have been, after the [Russia-Ukraine conflict](#). The Russia-Ukraine conflict, has pushed issues, such as poverty, climate change and even the effects of COVID-19 to the margins and thus relegated the needs of the developing countries to the periphery.

For South Africa, the world order needs to be constituted of 'representative'¹⁴ multilateralism, so that even if there is not a shared understanding of global challenges, the interests of the developing can at least still be heard. In this vein, South Africa frequently [calls](#) for the

¹² Also reflected in South Africa's 2022 'South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment', <https://www.dirco.gov.za/national-interest-framework-doc/>

¹³ This was especially pronounced after countries in the global South struggled to gain [equal access to vaccines](#).

¹⁴ The only other member who uses this term in the speeches surveyed, in relation to the UNSC, is Brazil.

reform of the UNSC, WTO and other IFIs so that a more balanced, representative and equitable international order can be created.

4. Limitations

Some limitations of this study are observed. Firstly, it was a challenging exercise to find country speeches of ‘equal’ weighting. For example, some speeches such as China’s, Russia’s and South Africa’s were more accessible and easily searchable (published by the governments and related bodies). In contrast, it was more difficult to find relevant speeches for both India and Brazil, particularly the latter (this is perhaps because leadership in the country has changed three times during the timeframe of this study). The researchers therefore had to cast a wider net to speeches beyond presidential level to ministers and representatives of Brazil. The speeches of China, Russia and South Africa also appear to contain more content and length, while the others were more vague, short, and generic. Therefore, there is caution in relying on speeches solely to gauge these countries’ views of the international system and order, although the speeches are valuable to provide comparison and contrast to indicate state positions through the use of particular keywords. Indeed, questions remain over why some states make their speeches more available than others and whether this reflects their enthusiasm for BRICS participation or if it is purely due to domestic or bureaucratic issues.

Furthermore, the analysis of the timeframe 2018-2023 does not capture all the on-going developments leading up to the forthcoming summit in Johannesburg. For example, there remains debate on the BRICS expansion question. Furthermore, is the potential for a [common](#) currency (some [believe](#) this is still early days, while if this development materialises, it could potentially ‘reorder’ the international system that relies on the US Dollar as the world’s standard currency unit). Both areas impact the discussion on BRICS and global order. Finally, like any state-focused study, this brief takes the state as the main unit of analysis. However, there may be nuances within each country that are not captured in this method of exploring the expression of the positions of BRICS members.

5. Findings and Conclusion:

As the respective speeches by state representatives indicate, there are indeed variations in views towards the international order/system amongst the BRICS states, apart from their shared interest in upholding multilateralism. Another finding is that while much focus on the BRICS and the Global South has been their current discontent with the international order vis-à-vis COVID-19 and Russia-Ukraine, many of the documents (2018-2022) surveyed, reflect that their current concerns and discontent have been on-going and consistent, pre-dating these events.

Finally, a set of themes and questions emerged from the documents surveyed, which indicate that there is complexity in the diversity of perspectives towards order, multilateralism and even multipolarity.

Rhetoric and reality:

I am not a great fan of the concept of the Great Reset. And why is that? We don't have anything against what is in it, which is sustainable development, equality and everything. But the question of what is not there, and that's basically the concepts of freedom and democracy.

- Remarks by former Brazilian Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo (2021)

This brief reflects that the BRICS do not seek an alternative order as some media reports suggest. In fact, the phrase 'global order' hardly features in the documents surveyed, besides the occasional call for greater multipolarity. Instead, the group seeks to work within the current international structure (created in 1945). In this way, the BRICS - like NATO-aligned states - seek to protect the 'rules-based order'; only, how this order is interpreted and who stands for peace and prosperity, differs. The group believes that states have deviated¹⁵ from the international system, and thus the BRICS states seek to reinvigorate or return to it. Therefore the international 'rules-based' order (which is made up of [various](#) international laws, regimes, institutions, rules and norms) is clearly defined differently by states, not only between BRICS and the states that they are discontent with but also within the BRICS grouping (next section).

¹⁵ A similar statement was made by Sooklal, South Africa's BRICS sherpa: 'The rules-based international order that pooled the collective wisdom of world leaders following the devastation of World War II is today a shadow of what it was originally envisaged'. (See: Sooklal, A. 2022. 'The Indo-Pacific, an emerging paradigm for peace, cooperation, sustainable development and mutual prosperity', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, DOI: 10.1080/19480881.2023.2172814).

Perhaps what muddles understanding is that the ‘US-led order’ (the hegemon who can interpret the rules) is frequently used [interchangeably](#) with ‘rules based international order’ - and countries such as Russia and China suggest in their speeches that they are discontent with the former. What the BRICS seek is the latter but with a re-ordering to a multipolar arrangement (namely through multilateral institutions) and based on certain principles.

Intra-group differences:

There is shared BRICS interest in reforming the multilateral system, they all advocate for multilateralism and the centrality of the UN and UN Charter. However, if we zoom into the respective speeches, it becomes apparent that there are differences in what they want to reform. Brazil, India and South Africa speak of UNSC reform, while China emphasizes the economic element of the international system and like Russia and Brazil, challenges unilateralism and protectionism. Similarly, perspectives differ across country and even time; for instance, in 2020 during the height of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), Brazil was critical of the non-transparent and non-responsive nature of the World Health Organization (WHO) while the 2022 BRICS Beijing Declaration, supported and acclaimed the WHO for its leading role in global health governance.

While much debate is focused on the differences between Global South and Global North (G7) interpretations of world order, what is not captured are the hierarchies and intricacies within the Global South. For example, one [analysis](#) states that shared dissatisfaction with the international system does not equate to siding with autocratic revisionism. Moreover, there are differences in agenda focus. Much [attention](#) has been given to the arrest warrant for Putin at the forthcoming BRICS (until he decided not to attend in person) and even the debate on BRICS enlargement but this has also detracted from the opportunity to highlight the purpose of the forthcoming summit, themed as ‘BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism’. Questions remain, such as: whose preference for new BRICS members will prevail and, in this case, can the group continue to exemplify what it means to practice reform from within (as one of India’s speeches pointed out)?

It is, however, true that states such as Brazil and Russia have been explicit about differences between and among BRICS member states and how this should not get in the way of the larger picture. The dilemma is what becomes priority for each country, is it fulfilling immediate individual interests and concerns, or the shared interest in long-term multilateral

reform? Moreover, what ways would the dynamics within the group change if this 'unilateralism' (that several speeches refer to), ceased to exist?

Beyond 2023: what is multipolarity?

BRICS mention multipolarity in various documents and speeches, albeit not constantly. The group is emblematic of the questions the Global South as a whole is grappling with. For instance, what is meant by multipolarity, besides the configuration that is commonly being called for?

At the moment discussions around multipolarity commonly involve phrases such as 'strategic non-alignment' and 'strategic autonomy' that are exemplified by countries such as India and Brazil, who seek practical solutions and engagement. Likewise [William Figueroa](#) explains why a multipolar configuration in the Middle East currently serves China better than a situation where it directly challenges the US, as it is not yet able to counter the US' established presence and military power in the region (despite its relative success in brokering between Iran and Saudi Arabia). These state actions and broader discussions place context, strategy, and interests, understandably so, as a defining explanation for why multipolarity is sought after and promoted.

Yet, what is missing in current discussions are the values and principles that would underpin the building of a multipolar world. Whose values and principles would inform it? Does the UN Charter adequately respond to the context of strategic non-alignment? Does multipolarity equate to multilateralism; if not, how would it impact multilateralism? These are defining questions, as the world grapples with what a multipolar world is in its imagined form and what it is being characterized as through the actions of selected states. ●