

Op-ed

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Global Order and the Embodiment of (BRICS) Expansion

¹The 15th BRICS summit has passed and like many big events of this nature, the headlines were focussed on the issues of the day, such as the groups' expansion - (where [six](#) new members were invited to join) and discussion over alternatives to the dollar's dominance in the international financial system. Another common thread, however, has been the emphasis for a more equitable international/world order. This agenda pre-dates the recent summit and even the Russia-Ukraine crisis where calls from the Global South – a [shorthand](#) for Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and parts of Oceania and Asia – for a multipolar order appeared most acute.

This corroborates with the findings from a recent co-authored [research brief](#). The BRICS have consistently, in declarations and respective speeches surveyed over the last five years, called for an order that is multipolar and along with that, words such as 'fair', 'just', 'equitable' and 'representative'. Multipolar in this context [suggests](#) that no single power dominates. This is but one aspiration and perspective of the world.

In the book, [Superhumanities](#), Jeffrey Krepel states "...the real is plastic or malleable, that we, as individuals and communities, actualize what is potential in that real, and that different peoples actualize different truths and values, even different realities'...moreover that '[t]ruth is relative, then, not because there is no truth *but because there is too much truth*'.

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Krepel's words summarise current debates about global order, where there are multiple views of what such an order looks like or should look like. There is general agreement that the US' unipolar dominance is [diminishing](#) but where power will diffuse to is where opinions differ, such as from a bipolar system dominated by the US along with China, to perspectives of a [bi-multipolar](#) world, where the US-China dynamic is counterbalanced by Global South dynamics. In many ways, all these configurations of the world, including multipolarity, speak to a truth about the world, depending what region, state, society and even industry one speaks from.

These different views also reveal surprising commonalities. The research brief mentioned, also finds that as much as the BRICS seeks to re-order the international system, they do not actually seek to replace the fundamental foundations built in the post-WWII era and that include the centrality of the United Nations and its Charter, as well as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other international financial institutions. While the BRICS may differ in 'how' the architecture over this foundation should look, they surprisingly, like the defenders of the liberal international order, talk about protecting or upholding 'a rules-based order' (not to be mistaken with the current US-led order). The BRICS then, do not necessarily suggest moving completely away from the past. Even Amitav Archaya has for the last decade [stated](#) that 'multipolarity' that continues to circulate (like amongst some BRICS members) is itself an outdated concept – he prefers 'multiplicity'. He views multipolarity as Eurocentric because it refers to a particular period in European history in the 19th century that is unlikely to repeat itself.

While the BRICS do not seek to replace the current international system, there is still opportunity, at this time in history, to take a step back and consider where we are going as a humanity. How do we capture all the truths that currently exist, and could BRICS 'expansion' mean more than an increase in size to include reaching for new possibilities, inspiration, and in the group's words, 'reinvigorate' the existing system? These are important questions following the UN's September 2023 SDG [Summit](#) and

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in the run up to the 2024 Summit of the [Future](#), also amidst the growing militarisation of our ocean regions as part of the quest for ‘a new global order’.

The debate over the future of global order takes place during an interesting time. UN Secretary General António Guterres [says](#) that we are at an inflection point - either ‘breakdown’ or ‘breakthrough’. There are multiple crisis points in the post-pandemic world, such as climate change that is exacerbating poverty, energy security concerns, the re-shuffling of security positions post-Russia-Ukraine and importantly, there is a crisis in the breakdown of the embodiment of global values and solidarity. Deep fragmentation is clear, so much so that there are increased responses to re-imagine the current order. Besides the mentioned UN Summit of the Future (which is seeking a [new agenda](#) for peace), there are the [Princeton Principles](#) on re-imagining world order, and some scholars are even looking to [Imagine Global Futures](#) by exploring ‘radical visions for a world after neoliberalism and empire’.

In this vein there is opportunity for countries in the Global South and specifically the BRICS – that in 2024 will [represent](#) almost half the world’s population – to rethink what it means to grow and expand and not only in an economic security sense. To re-imagine order, there are some questions and issues to begin to consider:

What do we want the world to look like? The BRICS call for a ‘just’, ‘equal’ and ‘fair’ order but there remains a challenge of embodiment, as these values and principles exist along an increased interest in ‘strategic non-alignment’ and ‘strategic autonomy’, concepts that place national interest over solidarity. While fulfilling state interests is nothing new, the question is whether current values and principles in-action are congruent with how the BRICS describe [multipolarity](#).

Looking to the past for solidarity in the future: At the risk of romanticising the past, history is a source of inspiration. What circumstances motivated the kind of solidarity we saw during the Asia Relations Conference of [1947](#), and could this help create a framework for the competition we are witnessing in the Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific today? What about the values and principles of the Non-Aligned Movement - can they be revisited and are they still relevant ([scholars](#) today tend to stress a position of non-alignment that differs from the movement).

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In Adom Getachew's work, [Worldmaking after Empire](#), she speaks of how leaders such as Nkrumah reinvented self-determination so that it reached beyond an association with a nation and instead, challenged transnational economic, legal and political hierarchies. Can the same solidarity be revisited once again?

New places of inspiration: The Westphalian interstate system is largely based on secular modernity, yet it does not address an inherent 'lust for power' and is the same system that sparked a global [resurgence](#) of religion post-September, 2001. It is important that no culture or religion is placed above another but with new BRICS members also comes more diversity in views and backgrounds. [Scholars](#) studying faith-based diplomacy provide new avenues to think about how ethical values (not specifically religious ones) need to be reintroduced into the international community to reach the goals set out by the UN. There cannot be shared ethical values without embodiment at the individual level and they point to the value of second-track diplomacy (the space where relations can be repaired), as an important avenue beyond traditional track-one diplomacy (official government action), which tends to be rooted in Realism. Just like reality, that Krepel says is malleable, so is diplomacy experimental.

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Where do we locate values? The BRICS summit hosted in South Africa showed glaring discrepancies between the language of an equitable system amongst leaders at the international level and the inequality observed by local audiences within the host country. Callers into local radio stations frequently utilised discussions about the BRICS to air their dissatisfaction at the national level. This raises the question, whose values are valuable? Perhaps there is also a larger issue of the impersonable nature of politics today. Many of the world's most powerful people, organisations and associations nowadays hold summits behind heavy policing and [barricades](#). Likewise, as summits become increasingly broadcasted and 'twitterised', it seems that negotiations and decision-making – such as the decision to expand the BRICS and the logic behind it – are taken ever deeper behind-the-scenes.

These are just some – but not the only – questions and ideas to consider in the intentional building of global order, as well as BRICS expansion.