

BRICS SUMMIT 2023, THE GROWING DIVIDE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: ASSESSING INDIA'S POSITION

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Held in the backdrop of intensifying major power competition, the recent heads of state meeting of BRICS – the group of rising global economies – became a much-anticipated and happening event on the international scene. The Summit was another milestone in the unfolding of multipolarity as the BRICS nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – gathered to deliberate on the expansion of the group and the process of so-called ‘de-dollarization’ as part of efforts to encourage the trends to use local currencies in their trade and financial exchanges. The key members of BRICS, China and Russia, maintained their long-held positions to make adjustments and reforms in the ‘neo-liberal’ world order for a just and democratic transition into multipolarity. However, India – as it is an active partner of the U.S. and multi-alignments directed at containing China – appeared to be the odd one out. Especially, in the midst of these multi- and mini-alignments, the question arises whether India would be able to emerge as a trusted partner in the multilateral forums dominated by China and Russia while they are proactively seeking to create a post-Western world order.

The 15th BRICS Summit, held in Johannesburg under the leadership of South Africa from 22-24 August 2023, was an exclusive gathering of emerging and developing economies, where the Western countries were denied any chance to participate. The host sent invitations to 70 countries across the

world including the African continent.¹ However, Western countries were excluded from the guest list,² and no invitation was sent to major countries such as the U.S., UK, Germany, and France. Before the Summit, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, stated that “the French President wishes to become the first Western leader to attend the Summit,”³ while stressing the need to engage in a dialogue in the face of disagreements.⁴ Though the French President kept waiting for the invitation, he did not receive one.⁵ While maintaining BRICS’ inclusivity being the primary reason to exclude the Western countries, South Africa’s BRICS emissary Professor Anil Sooklal further clarified, “Though we have not invited the Western countries, BRICS has never said they do not speak to them.”⁶ Having said that, it goes without saying that the range of differences between the East and the West appears to be growing, and the BRICS’ exclusion of the Western countries indicates further evidence of the discomfort of the top economies from the Global South, especially Russia and China, with the ‘neo-liberal’ world order.

The BRICS members, since the inception of the group, have sought a larger role in the international economic order; advocated the need for the global financial institutions to adjust to the trends of multipolarity; and tried to create a cushion effect where neo-liberal order failed to provide them relief – of their preference in terms of economic convenience.⁷ India, being a proponent of global governance reforms, sees benefit in supporting this pursuit of BRICS, for mostly self-serving interests. It became further evident when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi particularly highlighted the need to reform multilateral financial institutions especially World Trade Organization (WTO), and, most importantly, setting a clear timeline for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reforms, in his speech, at the Summit.⁸

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- 1 Norman Masungwini, “SA Invites 70 Heads Of States to the BRICS Summit, but Western Leaders Excluded,” *News24*, Jul 21, 2023, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/politics/sa-invites-70-heads-of-states-to-the-brics-summit-but-western-leaders-excluded-20230721>.
 - 2 “Western Leaders Absent from Guest List for Upcoming BRICS Summit: A Blow to Diplomatic Dialogue,” *Eastern Herald*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.easternherald.com/2023/07/25/western-leaders-absent-brics-summit/>.
 - 3 Nicolas Camut, “Macron Wants to Crash Summit with Russia, China, and Allies,” *Politico*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-wants-to-attend-summit-with-russia-and-its-allies-french-fm-says/>.
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 Masungwini, “SA Invites 70 Heads Of States.”
 - 7 Alyssa Ayres, “How the BRICS Got Here?,” *The Council on Foreign Relations*, August 31, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/how-brics-got-here>.
 - 8 “Prime Minister’s Participation in the 15th BRICS Summit”, *Minsitry of External Affairs (Government of India)*, Aug 23, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37029/Prime+Ministers++participation+in+the+15th+BRICS+Summit>

The thematic focus of the Summit under the South African chair was: “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development, and Inclusive Multilateralism.” Accordingly, the BRICS leaders in Johannesburg mulled over following moves to:

- i. Develop a partnership towards an equitable just transition;
- ii. Strengthen multilateralism, including working towards real reform of global governance institutions and strengthening the meaningful participation of women in peace processes;
- iii. Unlock opportunities through the African Continental Free Trade Area (Afc FTA); and
- iv. Transform education and skills development for the future.”⁹

To meet these objectives, the BRICS leaders engaged in extensive and proactive interactions with their counterparts and state leaders and representatives in official meetings including BRICS Plus Dialogue, BRICS Outreach, BRICS Business Forum, and BRICS Business Council (BSC), along with exchanging ideas on the current and further pathways for interactions through New Development Bank.¹⁰

However, it was the top agenda item of the Summit-i.e. expansion of the BRICS – where India found itself differing from the other members, notably China. Beijing has long been insisting on a rapid expansion of BRIC to counter G7¹¹, and, in the Summit speech as well, the Chinese President reiterated the same emphasis in order “to make global governance more just and equitable.”¹² The Indian position, however, was different as it did not intend to see the economic bloc being influenced and eventually dominated by Beijing. Commenting on this issue, the Indian External Affairs Minister maintained that there must be “guiding principles, standards, criteria, and procedures for such admission.”¹³

However, after three-day-long deliberations, the BRICS leaders agreed to expand the bloc and came up with the Joint Communiqué, the Johannesburg II Declaration, which is a well-rounded,

⁹ “Themes and Priorities,” *BRICS 2023*, <https://brics2023.gov.za/theme-and-priorities/>.

¹⁰ “About the Summit,” *BRICS 2023*, <https://brics2023.gov.za/about-the-summit/>.

¹¹ “China Wants to Speed up BRICS Expansion to Counter G7”, *Euro-Mediterranean Economic Association*, Sep 4, 2023, <https://euromed-economists.org/china-wants-to-speed-up-brics-expansion-to-counter-g7/>

¹² “China’s Xi Calls for Accelerated BRICS Expansion”, *Reuters*, Aug 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-calls-accelerated-brics-expansion-2023-08-23/#:~:text=%22We%20should%20let%20more%20countries,new%20members%20to%20the%20grouping.>

¹³ “BRICS Expansion Still Work in Progress”, *Deccan Herald*, Jun 3, 2023, <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/brics-expansion-still-work-in-progress-eam-jaishankar-1224509.html>

comprehensive, and multidimensional document that goes beyond the scope of the economy – generally considered to be the primary area of concern for BRICS.

In the Declaration, the leaders decided to:

- i. Include the Argentine Republic, Arab Republic of Egypt, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, as full members from January 1, 2024;
- ii. Continue with the expansion process as the BRICS reached a consensus on the guidelines to add new members;
- iii. “Encourage the use of local currencies in international trade and financial transactions between BRICS as well their trading partners” and task their Foreign Ministers/Central Bank Governors to draw a future roadmap in the next Summit¹⁴;
- iv. Oppose the trade barriers, under the pretext of Climate Change, which are “not WTO-consistent” but rather a “means of arbitrary, or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade”¹⁵;
- v. Regularly host the BRICS Political Parties Dialogue to enhance economic cooperation among the group members; and
- vi. Continually seek guidance from BRICS Think Tank Network for Finance, in terms of governance of the group.

In addition, the Johannesburg II Declaration calls for just, equitable, and democratic reforms in the world order, especially the global and political financial institutions. It also called for “strengthening of disarmament and non-proliferation including the conventions on the use of biological and chemical weapons, while supporting the efforts for Confidence-Building-Measures (CBMs) to prevent any future space wars.”¹⁶

Viewed from the prism of the current dynamics of major power rivalry and their effect on regional and global politics, the 15th BRICS Summit appeared to be pushing further towards the multipolarity processes. Some experts in International Relations (IR) saw the Summit as a “critical moment in the

¹⁴ “Johannesburg II Declaration,” *BRICS 2023*, Clause 45, pp: 14, <https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Jhb-II-Declaration-24-August-2023-1.pdf>.

¹⁵ “Joanhsburg II Declaration”, Clause 45, pp: 63.

¹⁶ “Joanhsburg II Declaration”, Clause 20, pp: 6.

creation of a new world order,”¹⁷ and a force multiplier to “reset the international relations.”¹⁸ The French President dubbed the gathering as a “challenge to our international order,” predicting the expansion of BRICS as the eventual dethronement of Europe.¹⁹ Here, again, the question arises what position India is going to take amidst the prevailing atmosphere of post-Western multipolarity in the BRICS and how can it refrain from annoying its Western partners, especially France, which is currently observing its influence declining in Africa.

With the exclusion of Western countries, even in the name of ‘inclusivity,’ the drift and opposition to the Western-led world order can hardly be overlooked. Beijing has long been pushing for what it calls a fair and democratic multipolar world and, according to the Director of London’s SOAS China Institute, Steve Tsang, Chinese President Xi Jinping showed their “fellow men that they all want a similar future: none of them want to live in a Western-dominated world.”²⁰ The Director of the Global South Program at Quincy Institute, Washington DC, Sarang Shidore, succinctly summed up this latest development claiming, “the US cannot set all the norms...we are, in a world, where a new replacement is on the horizon.”²¹ Moreover, as aptly noted by the prominent analyst, Pepe Escobar, BRICS also took OPEC and OPEC+ countries in its fold – a strategic move that China and Russia have long been brooding over to erode the ‘hegemony’ of the petrodollar.²²

Given that it is not BRICS only where Beijing and Moscow have been seeking to create an alternate (post-West) world order through multilateral forums – be it at the regional or global level – where does New Delhi stand?

The BRICS Summit was a much-anticipated event for the international community because of the in-person meeting of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the backdrop of the border dispute. Earlier, the Indian media quoted New Delhi’s decision to hold the Shanghai Cooperation (SCO) Heads of State Summit virtually, ostensibly due to its issues with China.²³ Recently, New Delhi has strongly protested over the new Chinese map, which, according to

¹⁷ “The BRICS Summit 2023: Seeking an Alternate World Order,” *Council of Foreign Relations*, August 31, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/brics-summit-2023-seeking-alternate-world-order>.

¹⁸ Pepe Escobar, “Welcome to the BRICS 11,” *The Cradle*, August 25, 2023, <https://new.thecradle.co/articles/welcome-to-the-brics-11>.

¹⁹ Vinoud Dsouza, “BRICS Expansion could Dethrone Europe, Warns France’s Macron,” *Watcher Guru*, August 30, 2023, <https://watcher.guru/news/brics-expansion-dethrone-us-europe-warn-france-macron>.

²⁰ Samantha Granville, “Brics Summit: Is a New Bloc Emerging to Rival US Leadership,” *BBC*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66609633>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Escobar, “Welcome to the BRICS 11.”

²³ Sachin Parashar, “Amid Strife in Ties with Pakistan and China, India to Host SCO Summit Virtually on 4 July,” *The Times of India*, May 30, 2023,

the Indian side, “lays claim to its side of the territory.”²⁴ Asserting New Delhi's wish to be recognized independently and differently from Beijing, the Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, stated in a meeting ahead of the G-20 Summit, “India should not be seen as China plus one.”²⁵ The G-20 Summit was held in New Delhi under the Indian chair but Chinese President Xi Jinping decided not to participate in it; Prime Minister Li Qiang attended the meeting instead.²⁶ China also boycotted the G-20 Tourism Working Group meeting held in Srinagar, in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) as it is a disputed territory.²⁷ Ahead of the BRICS Summit as well, the differences between China and Russia, over the issue of expansion of the group, were loud and clear.²⁸

However, the rub for India is its purported ‘non-aligned’ foreign policy under the vectors of mini- and –multi-laterals, especially oriented to counter Chinese influence. On the one hand, India is part of Eurasian and pro-South alliances and platforms including SCO and BRICS; on the other, it is an active part of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Strategy, and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QAUD), directed at China's containment. This aspect of Indian foreign policy has been questioned by many. Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Ashley J. Tellis, termed India as “America's bad bet” as he believes, New Delhi is not going to side with the U.S. in any possible clash between Beijing and Washington.²⁹ The Director of the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology (CSST), Rajeswari Pillai, warned of the dangers of befriending all and trusting none while ignoring the eminent pitfall of “not having a true friend when in danger.”³⁰ With this approach, in the BRICS as well, India remains the odd one out if it does not decide which side to pick while the rising powers find themselves in the throes of a post-Western world. New Delhi is, indeed, an odd one out, among the partnerships with the reference to rising China and sanctioned Russia, as it intends to carve out

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/amid-strife-in-ties-with-pakistan-and-china-india-to-host-scosummit-virtually-on-july-4/articleshow/100630144.cms?from=mdr>.

²⁴ “China Map: India Lodges 'Strong Protest' over Territory Claims,” *BBC*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66654645>.

²⁵ “India Shouldn't Be Seen As China Plus One: S Jaishankar To NDTV,” *NDTV*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-shouldnt-be-seen-as-china-plus-one-s-jaishankar-to-ndtv-4339586>.

²⁶ Martin Quin Pollard et al, “Xi to Skip G20 Summit in India, China to Send Li Instead,” *Reuters*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-says-premier-li-will-attend-g20-summit-2023-09-04/>.

²⁷ Menaka Doshi, “China Boycott G-20 Meet in Kashmir, Calls it Disputed Region,” *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-20/china-to-boycott-g-20-meet-in-kashmir-calls-it-disputed-region#xj4y7vzkg>.

²⁸ Bhargav Acharya and Gabriel Araujo, “BRICS Divisions Re-Emerge Ahead Of Critical Expansion Debate,” *Reuters*, August 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/brics-leaders-meet-south-africa-bloc-weighs-expansion-2023-08-22/>.

²⁹ Ashley J. Tellis, “America's Bad bet”, *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>.

³⁰ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “The Problem with India's Multiple Strategic Dalliiances,” *The Diplomat*, May 31, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-problem-with-indias-multiple-strategic-dalliiances/>

is own sphere of influence and does not wish to be seen as “China plus.”³¹ It might succeed in this attempt and increase its political and economic influence but it is very difficult to predict whether it would be able to win the trust and confidence of its strategic neighbor and rival, China, in an effort to introduce much-needed reforms in the current global governance model.

³¹ “India Shouldn’t Be Seen As China Plus One”: S Jaishankar to NDTV, *NDTV*, Aug 29, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/news/india-shouldn-t-be-seen-as-china-plus-one-s-jaishankar-to-ndtv-720867>