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An Expanded BRICS Brings Opportunities and Challenges for Russia

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The BRICS leaders brief the media on the outcomes of the XV BRICS Summit. **15th BRICS SUMMIT / flickr**

Yevgeny Prigozhin's sudden death took attention away from the much-hyped 15th BRICS Summit. This buzz came from the prospect of enlargement. Despite being a divisive issue within the bloc, at the 11th hour, an agreement was reached among members to invite Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to become part of the group.

At a glance, BRICS seems mighty. Currently, it accounts for approximately one-quarter of the world's GDP and over one-third of its population. These numbers will swell even more if the accession of the six new members does in fact take place. Yet history shows how the would-be bloc has struggled to translate these figures into true influence.

The original appeal of BRICS came from the fast growth rates of its economies and their

growing share of world GDP. Today, this optimism has diminished, and even China's economic outlook is less promising than it was at the time of BRICS' formation. Institutionally, the bloc has developed some joint initiatives such as the BRICS Bank (today called New Development Bank) but many have emerged only to discreetly fade away, such as the BRICS undersea cable. Primarily, it acts as a discussion forum, which takes no action.

While enlargement took center stage, Russia also stood out at the summit for its diminished presence.

BRICS is important to Russia as a key vehicle for its vision of a multipolar world. But Russia itself struggles within the bloc. Because of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become toxic and unattractive. Despite attempts by South Africa and Russia to find an exemption for the International Criminal Court's warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrest, he did not attend the summit. Putin's address – which was delivered in a bizarre voiceover – portrayed the bloc as an emergent anti-Western alliance. But no other head of state echoed this rhetoric. In fact, South African diplomats outright rejected the notion that BRICS is a rival to the G7.

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The items on Russia's agenda found little purchase. One of Putin's primary concerns at the summit was the dollar. De-dollarization has been framed as epoch-shifting but its aims are more practical. Trading in local currencies would help avoid, if not fully evade, international sanctions, facilitating the purchase of Russian energy for all BRICS members. Yet, the prospects of full de-dollarization remain elusive if not outright fanciful, as the dollar remains significantly more stable than the ruble and yuan

In both cases, Russia's goals are neither met by the wishes of other members, nor reality. But where do the summit's conclusions leave both Russia and BRICS?

The addition of six countries would not necessarily strengthen BRICS. Enlargement will not solve the fundamental problem of translating the bloc's combined demographics and economies into hard and soft power. More immediately, enlargement can lead to further problems: the would-be six new members have widely different foreign policy objectives, ranging from outright confrontation with the U.S. to seeking long-term security commitments from Washington as in the cases of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Since BRICS makes decisions by consensus, its already narrow scope for agreement is bound to close further.

Nor would the six potential members bring many benefits to Russia. None of them are large trade or investment partners with Moscow. Four out of the six voted in favor of the March 2022 United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Russia's full-scale aggression on Ukraine. While they might coordinate their trade policies at times, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are competitors of Russia in the global oil market, vying for customers in China and India.

All this considered, the announced wave of BRICS enlargement is a net positive for Russia, especially when looking at the short term.

Generally, Russian foreign policy is not inclined to multilateralism. Moscow tends to prefer bilateral engagements where it can leverage the situation to its advantage as much as possible. In this sense, Russia primarily sees BRICS as a way to enhance its access to strategic partners., Thus the expanded bloc could provide new opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

All six countries can already be considered strategic partners of Russia. Out of these, only Egypt and the UAE have introduced any restrictions on Russia, which don't amount to sanctions. Most countries joining share a view of multipolarity which regards the rise of China as a transformative event in world politics. That said, these countries do not necessarily share Russia's messianic understanding of multipolarity.

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The benefits the new members could bring Russia are varied. Iran has supplied weapons to Russia. The United Arab Emirates provides an environment where Russia allegedly evades sanctions. Egypt is a committed partner of Russia in multiple spheres, notably cooperating over nuclear energy, importing Russian grain, and as a popular tourist destination. In April, Cairo was accused of allegedly planning to deliver weapons to Russia. Ethiopia is at the forefront of Russia's African diplomatic efforts, especially when it comes to the initiatives involving the Russian Orthodox Church.

However, relations with Argentina and Saudi Arabia are less straightforward. Argentina is on the brink of a change of government where a new far-right, pro-U.S. candidate is most likely to win. Buenos Aires' bid to join BRICS could thus be withdrawn or otherwise watered down. Then, while Saudi Arabia has at times partnered with Russia, especially concerning the oil markets and Middle East politics, Riyadh also hedges its loyalties with the West. Hosting China alongside Western nations for discussions about achieving peace in Ukraine shows this.

Despite embracing pseudo-anti-colonial rhetoric, Russia has not fully swayed the Global South to its side. The countries of this diverse group have sharply different views of Russia and its aggression against Ukraine, the latter of which are frequently disapproving. Even fellow BRICS members have diverging views. For instance, the South African government looks at BRICS as a successor to the Non-Aligned Movement, a vision that clashes with Russia's anti-G7 perspective.

These views are shaped by the distinct interests that Global South countries have, as they navigate the turbulence unleashed by climate change, Covid-19, and the knock-on effects of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, including high grain prices. When forming alliances, the West might do better by appealing to those interests rather than by trying to win over the Global South with less concrete values. The 15th BRICS Summit should be seen in that light as well.

Overall, BRICS enlarged membership might help to enhance Russia's access to some of its strategic partners. In the realm of messaging and propaganda, an enlarged BRICS adds weight to Moscow's rhetoric that Russia is part of the "world majority" standing against the West. Whether Putin's new BRICS partners see the world on the same terms is secondary to Russia's belligerent leader. As long as BRICS continues to at least superficially resemble an alternative to the current world order, Moscow will be satisfied.

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