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The Inclusion of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE in BRICS+: Symbolic Shift or Strategic Realignment?

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Introduction

The acronym BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) was first coined by Jim O'Neill in 2001 in his paper titled *"Building Better Global Economic BRICs."* In this paper, Neill projected the emergence of BRIC countries as dominant forces in the global economic growth, surpassing the combined GDP of the advanced industrial economies of the G7 by the mid-21st century.[1] Started in 2006, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, the first summit meeting of BRIC nations was held in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia. After the inclusion of South Africa in 2010, the acronym BRIC became BRICS,[2] and emerged as a framework to reflect the changing perspective of the liberal international order, where demand for reforms in the existing global order towards multipolarity was slowly taking center stage.

Currently, BRICS is an organisation of eleven economically, politically, and culturally diverse countries of the international political system. Its evolution to an expansion journey has been studied differently by different scholars. Some viewed it as a symbolic organisation which would not "*go beyond an ensemble of improbable characters of a naïve fable*,"[3] primarily due to its diverse nature. While others like Oliver Stuenkel, have regarded the group as a major platform for strengthening the voice of a multipolar world order.[4] Much to the disappointment of its critics, the organisation has now expanded its footprint into the regions ranging from West Asia and North

Africa (WANA) to Southeast Asia. Countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia have become full members of BRICS in the past two years.[5]

With this expansion, BRICS countries currently represent around 50% of the world's population, 40% of global GDP, and 26% of global trade.[6] In 2024, total exports from BRICS member countries stood at US$5.61 trillion, which accounted for 24.6% of global exports, while total imports stood at US$4 trillion, which was 17.5% of global imports.[7] Although external trade still presents a large amount in the total trade data of BRICS, however, as the following diagram shows (see Diagram 1), the past three years have seen steady growth in the internal trade.

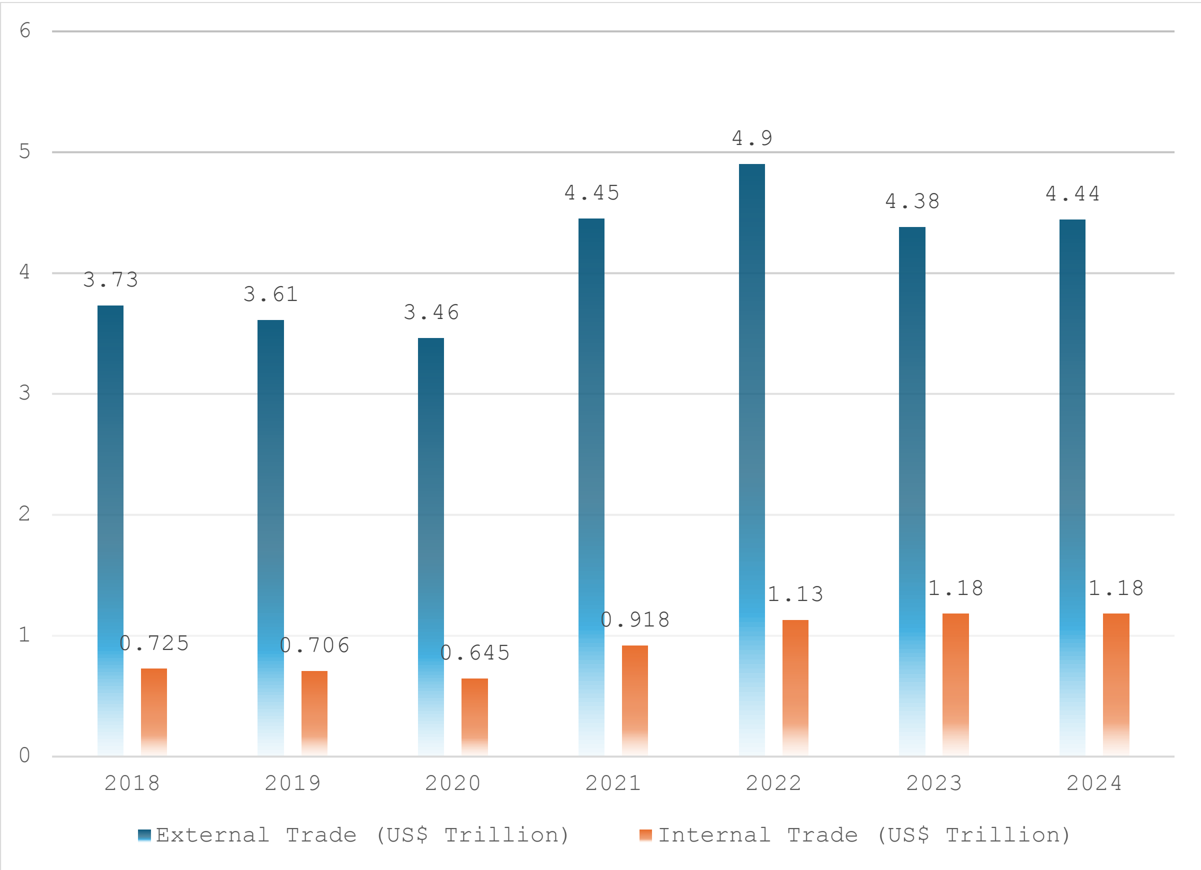

Diagram 1: Distribution of BRICS' Internal and External Trade **Source:** compiled by the author using data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity

With this context, this paper aims to analyse the inclusion of West Asian countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE into BRICS. The paper explains that this expansion is not merely a symbolic gesture by BRICS but a more calculated strategic shift that reflects the emerging realities of the 21st-century global order. The paper also highlights its impact on the Indian national interest at the regional and global levels.

Expansion in West Asia: Less Symbolism and More Strategic Leaning

In the increasing global uncertainty characterised by tariff diplomacy, protectionism, and hegemonic tendencies, the inclusion of West Asian countries into BRICS holds significant geostrategic and geoeconomic importance for them as well as for the existing member countries. In an ever-changing geopolitical reality of the current global order, this expansion is more than a mere symbolism and represents a new center of the multipolar world order. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, becoming a BRICS member provides a new impetus to their aspirations of moving towards a post-hydrocarbon economy by providing an opportunity for multi-alignment with the emerging market economies of Asia and Africa. As regards Iran, the sanctions-hit country needs a platform to circumvent the same by integrating its isolated economy with the largest consumer markets in the world, and BRICS provides that golden opportunity. For BRICS, this expansion strengthens its goal of creating a multilateral power structure, less dominated by the Western ecosystem and more by the principles of equity and inclusiveness. Therefore, this emerging political-diplomatic mechanism is not just a symbolic gesture but rather a calculated strategic shift. The following section explains the same in detail.

Strategic Realignment Aspects of BRICS' Expansion in West Asia

- **Strengthening Multilateralism:** The Joint Communique adopted at the Yekaterinburg Summit in 2009 highlighted several points of consensus among BRIC nations, and one of them was the strengthening of multilateralism. The highly westernised global governance systems and decision-making platforms present various structural complexities for the Global South countries. Inclusion of West Asian powers has strengthened the goal of establishing a multilateral rule-making and equitable power structure at the global level. Together, these countries can work for a more balanced global political landscape and find collaborative solutions to the geopolitical uncertainties. Although, as Kabir

Taneja highlights, the three newly joined West Asian members of the grouping have their own motivations,[8] their dissatisfaction with the Western-led governance models provides a common ground for fairer reconfiguration of global governance.

- **Strengthening the Energy and Financial Ecosystem of the Global South:** The inclusion of the largest oil-producing countries in the BRICS has enhanced the organisation's clout vehemently in the global energy market. As Diagram 2 shows, BRICS+ accounts for around 43% of the global oil production, 36% of global natural gas production, and more than 78% of global coal production.[9] This energy-driven economic expansion brings together some of the largest energy consumers in the world, such as India and China, with the world's top energy producers, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, and Iran. Till now, the role of BRICS countries in controlling the patterns of global energy markets was nil; however, now, the organisation includes four OPEC+ members, indicating an enhanced role of the Global South in the global economic outlook. Besides, with respect to the financial ecosystem, this expansion provides a strong impetus to strengthening economic multilateralism by moving away from the US-dollar-dominated SWIFT system by trading in local currencies. As the former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi declared on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, *"Iran decisively backs up BRICS' efforts toward de-dollarization…using national currencies and strengthening the bloc's mechanisms for payment and financial interactions."*[10] Moreover, New Delhi, Beijing, Moscow, and Abu Dhabi are also strongly advocating for a fairer financial system, as was seen during the 2024 Kazan Summit.[11] Furthermore, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have some of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, BRICS can leverage this to increase the New Development Bank's (NDB) investments across clean energy, digital and social infrastructure, transportation, and emerging technologies sectors in the Global South, reducing excessive dependence on the Global North.

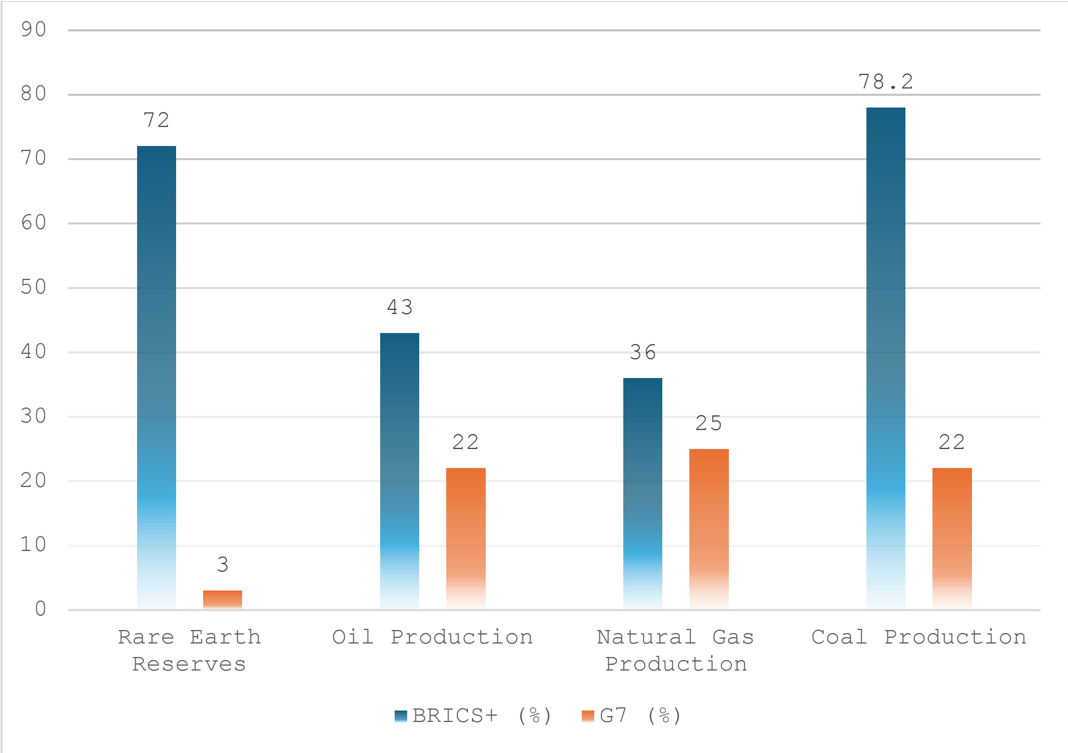

Diagram 2: BRICS+ and G7 in the Global Resource Landscape **Source:** Compiled by the author using different sources

- **Geopolitical Balancing in International Institutions:** The West-dominated global system and fragmented multilateralism have done nothing but put the developing countries at a disadvantage in all domains. Making the UN Security Council more representative and diverse, limiting the misuse of veto power in the Council, and making the Bretton Woods systems like the IMF and World Bank more democratic are some of the key objectives and shared goals of all the BRICS nations. In this context, the expansion of BRICS presents a strong scenario for geopolitical balancing and reforms in the multinational financial and intergovernmental institutions established after 1945. All the newly admitted nations, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have strongly advocated for creating a pragmatic, inclusive, and equitable international order that fosters sustainable economic growth and reflects the new realities of the 21st-century geopolitical dynamics.[12]

India and the Inclusion of the UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia

For New Delhi, BRICS has been a major platform for advocating global reforms, exercising strategic autonomy and securing strategic interests in a fragile global order. The inclusion of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran into BRICS holds strategic significance in light of New Delhi's strong cultural, civilizational, and economic partnership with these countries. The UAE is India's second-largest trading partner, and Saudi Arabia is the fourth largest trading partner. These countries also play a significant role in New Delhi's energy security, with Saudi Arabia being the largest crude oil supplier to India from February 2026, as India imported around 1.11 million barrels per day of crude oil.[13]

Concerning Iran, although New Delhi has stopped importing oil from Tehran due to the United States' sanctions diplomacy, Tehran's importance to New Delhi is very critical in the context of connectivity, as it helps India maintain its geographical connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. It also holds significance in the light of the North-South Transport Corridor, which provides New Delhi a direct connection to Russia and Europe. The development of the Chabahar corridor is another strategic asset that will strengthen India's regional connectivity.[14]

Since all three countries regard New Delhi as a strategic and natural partner and openly support India's United Nations Security Council (UNSC) membership candidature and its demands for increasing the representation of developing countries at both global financial and intergovernmental institutions. Additionally, their inclusion in BRICS will enhance India's global standing while positioning it as a leader of the Global South that advocates for peace, prosperity, and development of all in the region.

Conclusion

In the fragmented multi-polar global order, the idea of expanding BRICS is critical to making the international order more democratic while strengthening the geostrategic and geoeconomic partnerships among the member countries. In this scenario, the expansion into the WANA region also enhances the alliance's cohesion in a global power structure that reflects more of the Western-led patterns rather than being inclusive, representative, and equitable. Although the grouping is not to be portrayed as an anti-Western alliance, it definitely gives the developing countries a platform to present their voice regarding the inequalities while providing opportunities for sharing knowledge, expertise, and best practices along with transferring technology to the Global South countries. While some of the newly joined countries, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and even Iran, and the other two Gulf powers, are not on good terms with respect to their relationship, these nations will have to move beyond personal frictions to make the BRICS+ a real platform of action rather than just a talk-show grouping.

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