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# BRICS & Saudi Arabia's Membership: What Does This Mean?

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The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is witnessing a potential transformative shift, with emerging powers challenging the dominance of traditional global powers. In this context, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the BRICS nations have emerged as increasingly significant players that are providing their input into shaping the contours of a new world order.

In 2001, the acronym “BRICS” came to stand for what, at the time, were the world's fastest-growing economies. Just two decades later, however, the BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—have begun to position themselves as rivals to the current global financial and political platforms. Today, the BRICS nations account for roughly one-quarter of global GDP in dollar terms and one-third in purchasing power parties. According to the International Monetary Fund, China accounts for more than 70% of the group's economy, India about 13%, Russia and Brazil about 7% each, and South Africa 3%.

The first BRICS summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009 with yearly summits taking place ever since. The most recent was the fifteenth summit that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa hosted in August 2023. This summit proved different from those that preceded it, given that it involved modernizing and galvanizing the grouping. Six new countries, including Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, were invited to become full members of BRICS. Some observers see in BRICS+ a signal that the post-World War II order should accept the multipolar reality and change with the times. Beyond Chinese President Xi Jinping's broad [claims](#) of “unity and cooperation for the broader developing world,” however, one thing remains clear about the BRICS expansion: how unclear its purpose and future seem to be.

On August 24, 2023, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said Saudi Arabia would consider joining the [BRICS](#). “We are awaiting details from the group on the invitation, the nature of the membership, and its elements. Based on that and the internal measures, we will take the appropriate decision,” Prince Faisal bin Farhan was quoted as saying by Saudi television Al-Arabiya. More recently, the Kingdom's Minister of Commerce, Majid Al-Kasabi, [stated](#) in a panel during the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 17, 2024, that “[while] Saudi Arabia has been invited to attend BRICS, we have not yet officially joined BRICS.” For the Kingdom, the invitation to join the BRICS still remains on the table as there has been no official confirmation from the Saudi government in terms of the status of its official membership in the group. The expansion signifies a growing alignment of geopolitical and economic agendas within the BRICS. It incorporates major global oil producers near crucial trade chokepoints, such as the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and Bab-al Mandab Strait.

The move towards BRICS inclusion highlights the Gulf states' position, such as that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in making diplomatic efforts to develop and build strong economic partnerships to support the region's development and economic cooperation globally. This includes continuing to cement Saudi Arabia as a reliable energy partner to maintain stable energy markets. Regarding the Kingdom's membership in the bloc, it has [stated](#) that because of “the economic size of the Kingdom,” its geographical position, and the resources at its disposal—which include 17% of the world's proven oil reserves—its involvement “increases competitiveness.”



The BRICS expansion also seeks to enhance South-South cooperation to strengthen world governance. For the Kingdom, membership in the BRICS will bring new cooperation mechanisms, further strengthen its role for development purposes, and provide an additional platform from which to expand political and economic cooperation with the countries of the Global South.

While for Saudi Arabia BRICS membership would provide other alliance options, it would not indicate they are necessarily moving their alignment further eastward. The expansion of the BRICS to a BRICS+ format has potentially made it a more attractive institution for consensus-building and dialogue in the developing world. With the inclusion of countries such as Saudi Arabia, it is possible that the global order is headed for something beyond traditionally 'acceptable' partners in the eyes of the West. Seizing its geopolitical opportunity, Saudi Arabia, like the BRICS+ nations, has used this momentum to explore the potential of creating mechanisms that can better represent the needs and necessities of emerging and developing nations.

The expansion of the BRICS should therefore be seen as more symbolic, rather than a deliberate attempt to overturn the multilateral system that has existed for the past 70 years. For the Gulf countries, it does not represent any change in their strategic calculation. For the Kingdom in particular, maintaining a strong alliance with the US remains its fundamental foreign policy agenda item. In addition, the Kingdom is well aware of its vital position in groups such as the G20 and will prevent anything from impacting this. There are indications that the Global South is demanding a new kind of transparent and inclusive multilateral collaboration. BRICS is a mechanism where such collaboration can be tested out.

While the assumption has been that BRICS has become BRICS+ with the start of 2024, no clear membership criteria has been explicitly stated. The BRICS is simply a yearly gathering of world leaders without a permanent administrative structure. It is bound by a political declaration, which is renewed yearly. In terms of its political influence, a key issue undermining the political impact of BRICS as a bloc is the complex nature of relations between its members and their respective approaches towards the West. In order for BRICS to become a real alternative to the status quo, members would have to choose between adopting a more overtly anti-West stance, as advocated by China and Russia, or remaining a bloc of rising economies looking to further their own interests in a multipolar world order. The BRICS' efficacy and coherence will be put to the test by the opportunities and difficulties that come with a possible expansion. Its ability to create consensus among its various members will determine whether it can continue to be a credible force for changing global governance.

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