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BRICS in Rio: Expansion, Absence and the Gulf's Calculated Engagement

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The BRICS summit taking place in Rio de Janeiro on July 6 and 7 marks a turning point in the evolution of the bloc from an economic grouping to a broader geopolitical platform. With a membership that now includes eleven countries representing over half of the global population and 40 percent of global economic output, BRICS has rapidly expanded its footprint in the Global South. This year's summit is the first to include Indonesia as a full member, and the first leaders' gathering since the group's expansion to include Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, and others. Yet the complexity and contradictions within the bloc remain as striking as its ambitions.

The summit comes at a time when traditional multilateral institutions appear increasingly paralyzed. Divisions within the G7 and G20, compounded by a revived "America First" policy under President Donald Trump, have undermined the consensus that once underpinned global governance. In this context, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's call for emerging economies to defend multilateralism and push for the reform of global financial institutions has resonance. "In the face of the resurgence of protectionism, it is up to emerging nations to defend the multilateral trade regime and reform the international financial architecture," Lula [voiced](#) to a BRICS business forum on the eve of the summit.

Despite this rhetorical clarity, the bloc remains marked by internal divergence. Negotiators finalized a joint declaration in advance, but only after strenuous debate, particularly over language relating to Gaza, the Israel-Iran conflict, and reform of the United Nations Security Council. As of the first day of the summit, BRICS leaders reaffirmed their commitment to expanding the use of local currencies in trade and called for a more representative and accountable global governance architecture. A joint communique emphasized support for sustainable development, AI cooperation, and increased investment in Global South infrastructure, all framed as alternatives to traditional financial and regulatory systems.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's decision not to attend the summit in person is the first such absence in over a decade. While Premier Li Qiang is representing Beijing, the absence is seen as a missed opportunity for China to reinforce its leadership among emerging powers. This is particularly notable given that China has historically positioned BRICS as central to its multilateral vision. Russian President Vladimir Putin is participating virtually, constrained by the International Criminal Court arrest warrant.



The summit is seeing to see strong participation from other heads of state, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Their presence underscores the continued importance of BRICS as a platform for major emerging economies, even as internal tensions persist.

The role of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and its impact on BRICS

Of particular note is the deepening involvement of the Gulf states. The United Arab Emirates, now a full member, is actively shaping the summit's agenda. According to Brazilian officials, both China and the UAE have expressed interest in financing the Tropical Forests Forever Facility, a climate initiative spearheaded by Brazil to support conservation in endangered forest zones. This illustrates the UAE's commitment to aligning itself with global climate efforts, especially within forums that elevate the Global South's voice.

Saudi Arabia's position is more calibrated. Though not yet a full member, the Kingdom has steadily increased its engagement in BRICS forums, attending both the 2024 summit in Kazan and the April 2025 foreign ministers' meeting in Rio, where it was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister H.E. Waleed Al-Khereiji. These appearances reflect Riyadh's intent to contribute constructively to the bloc's evolving agenda while maintaining a cautious and pragmatic approach. Rather than seeking formal membership, Saudi Arabia views BRICS as one of several platforms through which to enhance its diplomatic flexibility and multidirectional engagement in a rapidly shifting multipolar world.

Riyadh shares several of the BRICS group's key priorities, such as equitable access to development finance, enhanced South-South cooperation, food and energy security, and sustainable economic growth. Through tools like the Saudi Fund for Development, Saudi Arabia has funded infrastructure projects across Africa and Asia, while its investment in renewable energy and agricultural partnerships with Latin American nations demonstrate alignment with the bloc's emphasis on resilience and long-term development. Yet Riyadh's approach remains deliberately non-committal. It continues to emphasize foreign policy independence and the development of bilateral ties with individual BRICS member states. Participation in the bloc's dialogues appears aimed at expanding influence and constructive engagement without assuming the obligations of formal membership.

The strategic caution behind Riyadh's engagement with BRICS was highlighted just ahead of the Rio summit, when U.S. President Donald Trump announced a new 10%



tariff on exports from countries “aligning themselves with the anti-American policies of BRICS.” The UAE and Egypt were explicitly named, while Saudi Arabia was exempt, a calculated reflection of the Kingdom’s ability to preserve strategic ties with Washington even as it deepens its engagement with BRICS. This exemption reinforced Riyadh’s diplomatic tact in balancing between multiple global alignments without provoking direct repercussions. Gulf markets reacted calmly to Trump’s tariff announcement. On July 6, the same day the policy was announced, Saudi Arabia’s stock market [rose](#) by 0.6%, a sign that investors viewed the country’s exemption as a reassuring signal of continued stability in its U.S. ties. In contrast, the UAE, faces greater uncertainty as it absorbs the impact of an added 10% U.S. tariff on its exports.

This strategy also reflects Saudi Arabia’s broader foreign policy objective: maintaining flexibility amid global uncertainty. Rather than binding itself to rigid alliances, the Kingdom emphasizes constructive engagement across multiple platforms, prioritizing practical economic cooperation over ideological alignment. It is also worth noting that BRICS remains an informal grouping without permanent institutions or a centralized decision-making framework. Its coordination relies mainly on rotating summits and consensus-building among members. While this flexible format allows Saudi Arabia to engage in global discussions without the obligations of formal bloc membership, it may also be a limiting factor. A more institutionalized or structured BRICS could, in fact, provide the kind of platform that prompts greater interest and formal participation from countries like Saudi Arabia, which value clear mechanisms for influence and cooperation. Riyadh views existing multilateral institutions as often outdated and unresponsive to the realities of a more multipolar world. Many of these institutions were shaped in a different geopolitical context and have struggled to adapt, often failing to provide equitable representation or effectively address global challenges. Engaging with BRICS allows Saudi Arabia to contribute to shaping a more inclusive and multipolar world order. At the same time, the Kingdom aims to strengthen regional development and global economic stability through targeted partnerships.

This dual-track approach is indicative of a broader recalibration in Gulf diplomacy. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not seeking to abandon their traditional strategic partnerships but rather to diversify their foreign policy instruments by engaging in alternative multilateral structures. Participation in BRICS complements their parallel involvement in the G20, OPEC+, and regional groupings like the GCC and I2U2.

One important dimension is the fact that the growing role of the Gulf in BRICS may serve to moderate the bloc’s political posture. While China, Russia, and Iran often advocate a more confrontational stance toward existing global powers, the UAE and



Saudi Arabia are likely to prioritize pragmatic economic engagement and institutional reform over ideological opposition. Their presence could temper more radical proposals and steer the bloc toward consensus on technical cooperation in areas like climate finance, trade facilitation, and development infrastructure.

An Uncertain Path Forward

The BRICS expansion also presents a governance challenge. The inclusion of countries with diverse political structures, strategic alignments, and regional rivalries adds complexity to the bloc's decision-making processes. Coordinated action on contentious issues such as Gaza, Ukraine, or currency de-dollarization remains difficult. Even the commitment to trade in local currencies, while expected to be reaffirmed at the summit, is unlikely to displace the dollar in the short term given infrastructure limitations and political caution among several members.

Brazil's rotating presidency has opted for a balanced approach, focusing on broadly agreeable themes such as artificial intelligence governance, global health, and investment in sustainable development. By doing so, it has avoided antagonizing Western powers while reinforcing BRICS's role as a platform for Global South diplomacy. This pragmatism may prove crucial in sustaining internal cohesion and attracting external investment in initiatives such as the New Development Bank's proposed guarantee fund for private sector financing. But this same pragmatism may also constrain BRICS's ability to articulate bold alternatives to the current configuration of global order, potentially limiting the bloc's transformative potential.

In sum, the Rio summit reflects both the promise and the pitfalls of BRICS's transformation. The bloc's expanding influence should not be overlooked. It has become a central forum through which emerging economies express dissatisfaction with existing global institutions and propose alternatives. Yet its credibility and effectiveness will depend on its ability to institutionalize initiatives, manage internal divergence, and deliver on commitments beyond communiqués.

For observers in the Gulf, BRICS represents both an opportunity and a test. As the bloc deepens its structure and agenda, it offers new pathways for influence on global financial and governance reform. But for that influence to be meaningful, Gulf engagement must move from symbolic participation to more substantive engagement. Riyadh's evolving posture will be particularly consequential, potentially tipping the bloc toward a more inclusive and effective multilateralism, one that recognizes the interests of both emerging powers and responsible stakeholders in the global order.



As the summit unfolded, the BRICS bloc also made clear its collective stance on global trade tensions. In its first-day communique, the group warned against the increasing use of “unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures,” calling them arbitrary, inconsistent with WTO rules, and harmful to the global economy. State media coverage in India and South Africa echoed these concerns in firm but measured language, signaling a coordinated response that notably avoided naming the United States or President Trump directly.

With the BRICS summit now underway, and early outcomes pointing toward deeper South-South cooperation and modest institutional reforms, the key question is not whether BRICS can rival existing institutions, but whether it can complement them while representing the shifting center of gravity in global politics. That, more than attendance lists or headline declarations, will determine its long-term relevance.

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