

Russia and China's approaches in the BRICS and Vietnam's possibility of participation¹

Dang Minh Duc

Assoc.Prof.Dr., Institute for European and Americas Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
Email: minhduc_ies@yahoo.com

Nguyen Thanh Lan

MA., Institute for European and Americas Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

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Abstract: *BRICS (the group of emerging economies) includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It was established in 2010 and has been playing an increasingly important role in the global economic and political process. Russia and China are not only the founders but also leading countries who have launched many initiatives to promote intra-bloc cooperation. Built upon combining mutual strengths, Russia and China's strategic cooperation in organizations, including the BRICS, has the potential to shape changes in international relations on both a global and regional scale. The article focuses on studying Russia and China's approaches within the BRICS framework and Vietnam's possibility of participating in this organization.*

Keywords: International Relations, Russia, China, BRICS

1. Introduction

BRICS is an international organization established in 2010, originally composed of four founding members - Brazil, Russia, India, and China - which are all emerging economies that have played an increasingly significant role in the global economic and political process. South Africa later joined the group. Since its inception, BRICS has focused on economic cooperation, the deepening of trade cooperation, and multilateral development, operating on the

principle of consensus. As of January 1, 2024, the organization officially admitted Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as new members. BRICS members share a common characteristic of high economic growth, and the group has emerged as a new center of influence in global politics and economics.

BRICS represents a framework for dialogue among countries with diverse economic and social systems, as well as varied civilizational backgrounds. The organization encompasses a vast market of over 3 billion people, accounting for 46% of the world's population, with a combined GDP of USD 58.9 trillion in the global economy. Its member countries produce

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more than 43% of global oil and roughly one-fourth of the world's total merchandise exports. By 2030, the bloc is projected to constitute 50% of the global economy (Юрий Ушаков, 2024).

The rise of BRICS as an association of "emerging powers" with growing global influence embodies an alternative to Western global hegemony under U.S. leadership.

Russia and China are not only the founding members of BRICS but also play leading roles within the group, introducing numerous initiatives to strengthen intra-bloc cooperation. Both countries are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, with large economies, vast populations, powerful militaries, and nuclear arsenals, as well as a shared border. By combining their respective strengths, the Russia-China strategic partnership has the potential to shape international relations on both global and regional scales. In response to mounting pressure from the United States and other Western countries in recent years, China and Russia have sought to enhance their multilateral engagement through frameworks such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Consequently, BRICS has continued to expand its role and influence, increasingly affirming its position as a key driver of global economic growth.

2. The standing of BRICS in the global economy and politics

Since its establishment, BRICS has evolved into a significant platform influencing the development of the global order and the balance of international power. The bloc's strength is evident in its central roles in global investment and trade networks, as well as its demographic and geographical significance. The BRICS countries are

situated across different continents, spanning both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, and are characterized by their diverse cultural and historical backgrounds. Despite these differences, the member states are closely connected by a shared vision for development and a common aspiration for an international order. BRICS plays an essential role in promoting global multipolarity and advancing the democratization of international relations.

BRICS focuses on key areas such as economic cooperation, the strengthening of trade relations, and multilateral development. Moreover, the organization operates on the principle of consensus. Brazil is endowed with abundant natural resources, including iron, oil, energy, and agricultural products while Russia possesses vast reserves of oil and natural gas. India holds a prominent position and advanced expertise in information technology. China serves as a "global manufacturing hub," supported by a large labor force and ranking as the world's second-largest economy, whereas South Africa stands as Africa's leading economic power and a major financial center in the global economy. The admission of three major oil-producers, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran, has brought together within BRICS nations that collectively account for 80% of global oil output (Xuan Hung & Thuy Van, 2024). With this expansion, BRICS is evolving into a new center of influence with significant impact on global politics and economics.

The BRICS countries have been increasingly asserting their standing on the global stage, particularly in areas such as international negotiations, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution. Rather than attempting to

supplant the West, BRICS seeks greater representation and influence in global affairs (Xuan Hung & Thuy Van, 2024). As major representatives of the developing nations, BRICS members advocate for reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO) and support a more representative and just model of global governance that reflects their current economic power within multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Despite inherent differences, economic and political asymmetries, and the absence of a unified strategy, the BRICS nations share a common vision grounded in principles of a global governance system that advances the interests of the developing world.

Over the past two decades, BRICS has undergone significant political and economic transformations, positioning itself as a potential key actor in shaping global development. Its potential lies not only in economic strength but also in a range of initiatives that are currently being promoted. Member states have embarked on ambitious infrastructure projects that reflect their respective visions of “smart” and “sustainable” development.

However, the core driver of BRICS’s current appeal remains its economic potential. In 2024, the bloc’s share of global GDP, measured in purchasing power parity (PPP), is estimated to reach a record of 36.7%, significantly higher than the G7’s 29.6% (representing the world’s leading industrialized economies). These figures highlight the substantial increase of BRICS’s role and its ongoing expansion in the global economy. The bloc’s average annual growth rate is expected to reach 4.4%, compared with the global average of 3.2%, while the G7 economies are forecast

to expand by only 1.7% (Tam Hang & Tra My, 2024). According to World Bank data (June 2024), among BRICS members, China ranks first globally in GDP (PPP) with USD 34.643 trillion, followed by India in third place with USD 14.537 trillion, and Russia in fourth with USD 6.452 trillion (World Bank, 2024).

With increasing economic resources and political clout, BRICS has become progressively attractive to developing countries, particularly those in the Global South. The bloc’s economic diversity and geographic dispersion enable it to pursue a truly global vision, extending its influence while challenging Western dominance. BRICS countries possess advantages not only in scale but also in natural resources and the distinctive growth patterns typical of emerging economies. At this stage, BRICS’s combined economic output has surpassed that of the G7, making it a key driver of global growth (D. A, 2024).

Moreover, BRICS members possess significant potential to advance a global economic transition toward greater sustainability and equity. Their investments in emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and renewable energy, position them as major forces of global economic growth and innovation in the near future.

Furthermore, BRICS countries are working to develop a new, strengthened, and constructive model of global governance instead of the existing unipolar system. Should the BRICS members reach an agreement to conduct trade in a common currency, it could accelerate the process of de-dollarization, reducing dependence on the U.S. dollar and promoting greater economic autonomy. The bloc’s objective is not to undermine the United States or

other Western nations economically or politically, but rather to reshape the global order from unipolarity to multi-polarity. For instance, the establishment of new financial institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB) has partially challenged the Western-dominated financial order, contributing to a more equitable and balanced international economic system.

3. Russia's and China's approaches within the group of emerging economies

For Russia, BRICS offers an opportunity to reaffirm its global ambitions. The country regards cooperation within BRICS as an effective tool to counter U.S. influence and the policies of Western partners in regions traditionally within Russia's sphere of interest. In light of its proactive foreign policy, BRICS holds particular significance for Russia in mobilizing political support, directly or indirectly, for its international initiatives and actions. This political backing has become even more crucial following the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West in the wake of the crises in Ukraine and Syria. Facing strong criticism from the West, the country has sought to bolster global partnerships to avoid international isolation. Russia also considers BRICS a valuable mechanism for promoting international security cooperation, especially in areas such as conflict resolution, the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), combating international terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy, money laundering, and irregular migration. The country further supports the establishment of joint institutions to coordinate BRICS activities in the domain of international security (The President of Russia, 2023: 6-7).

Overall, Russia's policies toward and within BRICS reflect a combination of idealistic

and pragmatic motivations. On the one hand, BRICS is of great importance to Russia in seeking its international stature, as the country believes that cooperation with other major emerging economies will more effectively enable it to regain its great-power status, shape the evolving global order, and compel the West, particularly the United States, to abide by the norms of that order. On the other hand, Russia prioritizes economic and strategic partnerships with BRICS members, as they are crucial to its prosperity and sustainable development, as well as to maintaining a balance of power with the West in the global geoeconomic and geopolitical landscape.

For China, BRICS offers a range of potential benefits and opportunities. *First*, this cross-regional initiative enables China to strengthen multilateralism and engage in a broader spectrum of global dialogues. *Second*, BRICS provides China with a means to reinforce its claim as a responsible and independent global actor. *Third*, it allows China to consolidate its dual identity as both a developing country committed to South-South cooperation and a rising power pursuing reforms in global governance. *Fourth*, as intra-BRICS relations have deepened, the group has become a platform for China to enhance trade and investment ties with other major powers across regions and to assume a more influential role in global debates on approaches to international development (Nguyen Thanh Lan, 2024: 7).

China views BRICS cooperation as an instrument for shaping a new, fair, and balanced world order that fosters and further accelerates its growth. The country has urged BRICS members to "pay attention to security issues, strengthen cooperation on major regional matters, and deepen

collaboration across all sectors” (Zhen’min Zhibao, 2012). Chinese leaders have consistently stressed that cooperation and joint development with BRICS partners (together with the G20 and SCO) constitute core priorities of the country’s foreign policy. China frequently emphasizes the economic complementarities among BRICS economies, while also highlighting its status as the largest economy within the grouping. China’s engagement within the BRICS framework emerged during a period when the country was striving to develop a new and more assertive political strategy on the international stage. This new strategy aligns naturally with BRICS’s objectives, which advance interests similar to China’s own while deliberately avoiding the predominance of any single state. Moreover, the emergence of BRICS has arguably made China’s economic and political rise less concerning to the rest of the world (Global Times, 2012).

China has made significant contributions in steering the BRICS cooperation mechanism towards success, thereby gaining widespread recognition. As the largest economy among BRICS members, China has consistently played a pivotal role in leading efforts to deepen and consolidate intra-BRICS collaboration. However, for China, BRICS serves as a complementary rather than a substitutive framework to existing international structures. More importantly, China’s actions indicate that its engagement with BRICS remains limited and largely instrumental. Instead, Beijing’s multilateral diplomacy has prioritized two other directions: Enhancing its influence within Western-dominated organizations, and establishing its own alternative mechanisms by channeling far greater resources into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)

and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) than into the New Development Bank (NDB).

Meanwhile, the other BRICS members also recognize that today’s pressing global issues demand fundamentally new approaches. Furthermore, all BRICS countries have encountered challenges in enhancing their influence within existing international institutions and are striving to strengthen their geopolitical standing by shaping a new global politico-economic structure. Their representation of diverse regions across the world lends additional weight to their collective ambitions.

4. Vietnam’s potential participation

Vietnam’s consistent policy is to support the role of multilateral forums and cooperation mechanisms, including BRICS that operate on the basis of respect for the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with international law. Such mechanisms are expected to amplify the voice and representation of developing countries in global governance and in addressing shared challenges, thereby contributing to the establishment of a multipolar and just world order, as well as to peace, stability, and development in both the region and the world at large. The expansion of BRICS is aimed at generating new momentum in a context where the bloc continues to confront diverse interests, varied development trajectories, differing degrees of relative geo-economic importance, and varying capacities to exert significant influence on the international system.

Vietnam maintains close relations with all BRICS member states. The country has established Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with China (in 2008), Russia (in 2012), and India (in 2016). China is currently Vietnam’s largest trading partner, while Russia remains a key partner in the

fields of energy, oil and gas. Meanwhile, cooperation with India has been growing strongly across multiple areas. At the BRICS Summit held in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024, the bloc added 13 partner countries, including Vietnam.

Vietnam has also shown interest in joining BRICS. The bloc's ongoing expansion process has had certain influence on Vietnam, presenting a complex mix of both opportunities and challenges. Therefore, Vietnam needs to take into account its economic strengths as well as its distinctive geopolitical position when considering multilateral alignments. Rather than affiliating itself with a specific bloc, Vietnam may prioritize organizations that offer the greatest potential for economic growth and trade diversification. As global politics becomes increasingly polarized, the country should maintain an economically neutral stance, avoiding direct participation in the agendas of major powers and exercising particular caution toward economic groupings inclined toward confrontation. Given these considerations, Vietnam may find greater advantages through regional economic integration or bilateral trade agreements.

Regarding the advantages: First, in recent years, international opinion has increasingly viewed Vietnam as one of the countries with strong potential to join BRICS. This recognition enhances Vietnam's international standing as an influential developing nation in the region. Participation in BRICS could provide Vietnam with opportunities to engage in key discussions and initiatives that shape global governance and development, thereby enhancing the country's standing in regional affairs and reinforcing its role in shaping ASEAN's external relations. Second, BRICS membership would offer

Vietnam an opportunity to diversify and deepen its global partnerships, enabling participation in "a more neutral global arena where sovereign and independent nations can pragmatically choose their partners" based on concrete interests. Third, joining BRICS would not only open up broader opportunities for economic and trade cooperation but also help attract investment resources and support from member states. Such engagement could also be a major opportunity to accelerate Vietnam's industrialization and economic transformation. Fourth, membership in BRICS would enable Vietnam to access the bloc's mechanisms, abundant resources, and vast markets, thereby facilitating economic diversification and mitigating risks arising from reliance on one or a few trading partners. This would contribute to advancing national development goals and enhancing Vietnam's capacity to cooperate in addressing pressing issues on the global agenda.

Regarding the challenges: First, BRICS members are geographically and economically dispersed, which may hinder effective trade cooperation due to high transportation costs and various barriers. Moreover, the member states possess diverse economic structures, with differing levels of development, industrialization, and specialization. Such significant economic disparities make it difficult to identify common interests and implement cooperative policies. Furthermore, BRICS does not have any formal trade or investment agreements. Second, the prospects for strengthening cooperation between Vietnam and other BRICS members, particularly those in the Middle East and Africa, may encounter certain difficulties due to increasing instability driven by strategic

competition among major powers. *Third*, joining BRICS could also constrain Vietnam's diplomatic flexibility. Closer alignment with China and Russia, the bloc's key members, might strain relations with important partners such as the United States and the European Union. As these Western powers increasingly view BRICS as a rival, Vietnam's participation could lead to trade tensions. Moreover, dependence on BRICS might result in reduced investment from Western countries. Therefore, to ensure long-term prosperity, Vietnam should seek to balance its relations between BRICS and external partners if it decides to join the bloc.

5. Conclusion

Russia and China are the two major powers within BRICS. Both nations seek to safeguard their shared interests, guided by a common understanding of the principle that when two equally armed powers contemplate war, they must carefully assess whether the potential gains justify the costs. While Russia and China hold differing, and at times opposing views on certain issues, they also advocate distinct approaches, including ones regarding the roles and missions of BRICS and the SCO in both the present and the future. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties and complexities in their bilateral relations, if Russia and China can overcome their differences and build mutual trust, BRICS would not be underestimated and represent an important dimension of regional integration that counters the unipolar dominance of the United States □

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