

## BRICS and the West: Emerging Powers and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order

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### Abstract

The BRICS nations Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa remain a formidable force in global politics in the 21st century. This article discusses the way that BRICS challenges the Western-dominated Liberal International Order (LIO), not only economically but also politically, providing alternative perspectives on how the world should be governed. The article does not consider BRICS as an economic bloc but rather its joint effort to reform international norms, institutions, and power relations. This paper is based on previous studies that emphasized a more multipolar and inclusive vision of global justice by BRICS, but this paper concentrates on BRICS' engagement with Western powers. It argues that the rise of BRICS has revealed and solidified the weaknesses that the LIO already has, including institutional strain, norm conflicts, and changing global alignments. This paper reviews conflicting ideas of sovereignty, development, and governance through political economy, IR theory, and empirical evidence. It concludes that the new global order will not simply redistribute power but will develop by the continued negotiation, selective reform of the old institutions, and the rise of the Global South.

**Keywords:** BRICS, Liberal International Order, Multipolarity, Global Governance, Institutional Competition, Sovereignty, Global South, Geopolitical Realignment.

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### INTRODUCTION

The BRICS grouping is a union of major emerging economies not only in terms of demographic and economic interests but also in terms of common interests: that of reforming world governing institutions (Olawore *et al.*, 2025). In this case, the West refers to a set of developed industrial democracies, mainly the United States and the European Union, that have influenced the international system since 1945. That system, commonly referred to as the Liberal International Order (LIO), is based on institutions and norms, including multilateral cooperation, free markets, and liberal political values (Ikenberry, 2011).

The LIO was a consistent pattern of Western-dominated global politics over decades. However, its power and legitimacy are increasingly doubted, particularly by states that have never been part of the

most important decisions. The formation of BRICS indicates a general discontent with the existing institutions and a sense of needing to have a more prominent role in global regulations and priorities (Olawore *et al.*, 2025).

The post-Cold War era was also occasionally known as a unipolar moment, as the West seemed to have no competition and liberal principles were now being marketed as universal. This hegemony faced increasing challenges with time. Domestic issues such as the financial crisis of 2008 shook confidence in the Western economic leadership. The order was also weakened by military interventions and the selective application of international norms (Acharya, 2014).

China has been a major force in economic and political growth at the international scale, which has

empowered institutional reform and increased representation necessities (Olawore *et al.*, 2025). Together with internal weaknesses, these pressures have created a persistent crisis of the LIO, opening space for alternative forms of global governance.

### Studies Focus and Objectives

This paper contends that BRICS is a victim and force behind the current crisis in the LIO. BRICS does not act purely outside the system but rather interacts with the existing institutions but also tries to change them. It no longer focuses on the BRICS as a single challenger but as part of a wider and more disputed international landscape.

The core argument is as follows: the relationship between a defensive Western order and an increasingly aggressive BRICS coalition is creating a more fragmented and competitive global system. This novel system is characterized by institutional rivalry and selective collaboration; the decisions of the nonaligned and developing states in the Global South are decisive.

### Research Objectives

- Discuss the ways in which BRICS threatens the institutions and conventions of the Liberal International Order.
- Evaluate the interaction and amplification of pressures of emerging powers and internal weaknesses within the LIO.
- Develop a nuanced story about the new world order that does not revolve around the concept of power transitions but revolves around the idea of negotiation, competition, and the strategic location of states.

### Research Questions

- How do BRICS-led initiatives such as new development institutions and alternative policy frameworks pose a threat to the power and norms of the Western-led order?
- How do gaps and flaws in Western institutions open opportunities to BRICS power?
- How do the non-BRICS states in the Global South play their role in the altered equilibrium between the Western institutions and new options?

### The Liberal International Order History and Strains Historical Foundations

The Liberal International Order came about as a result of World War II to ensure that war was avoided and that economic stability was achieved through rule-based cooperation. The IMF, the World Bank, and the United Nations formed the basis of this system, which was subsequently supplemented by the GATT and WTO trade agreements. As much as the order promoted economic integration and collective security, it reflected

the postwar balance of power, with Western states being at the helm (Ikenberry, 2011).

### Structural Limits and Increasing Criticism

The LIO has received criticism in spite of its role in ensuring stability and growth in the world. Its alleged universality often does not go well with governance forms that do not involve the active participation of the majority of the Global South. The IMF voting structure and permanent seats in the UN Security Council continue to incorporate power realities of the past, contributing to the grievances of legitimacy (Acharya, 2014).

Also, the close linkage between the international order and liberal political norms has created doubt. Interventions with the excuse of humanitarian protection or democracy promotion are often considered partial or selfish, particularly in postcolonial societies (Mamdani, 2020). Such tensions have undermined the faith in the system and have paved the way for other versions of world order.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The proposed study employs a qualitative case study design (Gerring, 2017; Blatter and Haverland, 2022) and comparative institutional analysis to investigate the connection between the BRICS coalition and the Liberal International Order (LIO). The paper is based on an interpretive approach (Béland, 2019) that is concerned with the role in the evolution of debates and global governance changes as driven by changes in material power, institutional practice, and competing normative claims.

The discussion is based on various sources of evidence, which are contrasted in materials to enhance credibility and depth:

#### Primary Document Analysis:

We have reached the source. We have analyzed core documents of both camps, the BRICS Leaders Summit statements (2010-2023) and the charters and project outlines of the New Development Bank (NDB), and even the policy papers of the Western initiatives, the Build Back Better World (B3W) of the G7 and the Global Gateway of the EU. Comparing these documents directly would allow us to compare their expressed objectives, their philosophies of ruling the world, and how each packaged its strategic intent to the world.

#### Literature Review:

International Relations, International Political Economy, and Global Governance: Peer-reviewed articles (2010–2024) on the role of BRICS, the sustainability of the LIO, and the status of the Global South were reviewed to map the dominant arguments of this topic. Key themes in this literature are used to situate the study within current debates (e.g., Stephen, 2019; Zürn, 2023; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2022).

**Descriptive Quantitative Indicators:**

This study includes a limited number of basic economic indicators, primarily those provided by the IMF World Economic Outlook (2024), to provide a background and demonstrate the general trends (e.g., GDP in PPP values and shares).

The institutional relationship of BRICS-created institutions (e.g., NDB) with established LIO institutions (e.g., World Bank) is the primary unit of analysis, and the language these actors employ when talking about sovereignty, development, and multilateral cooperation is the secondary one.

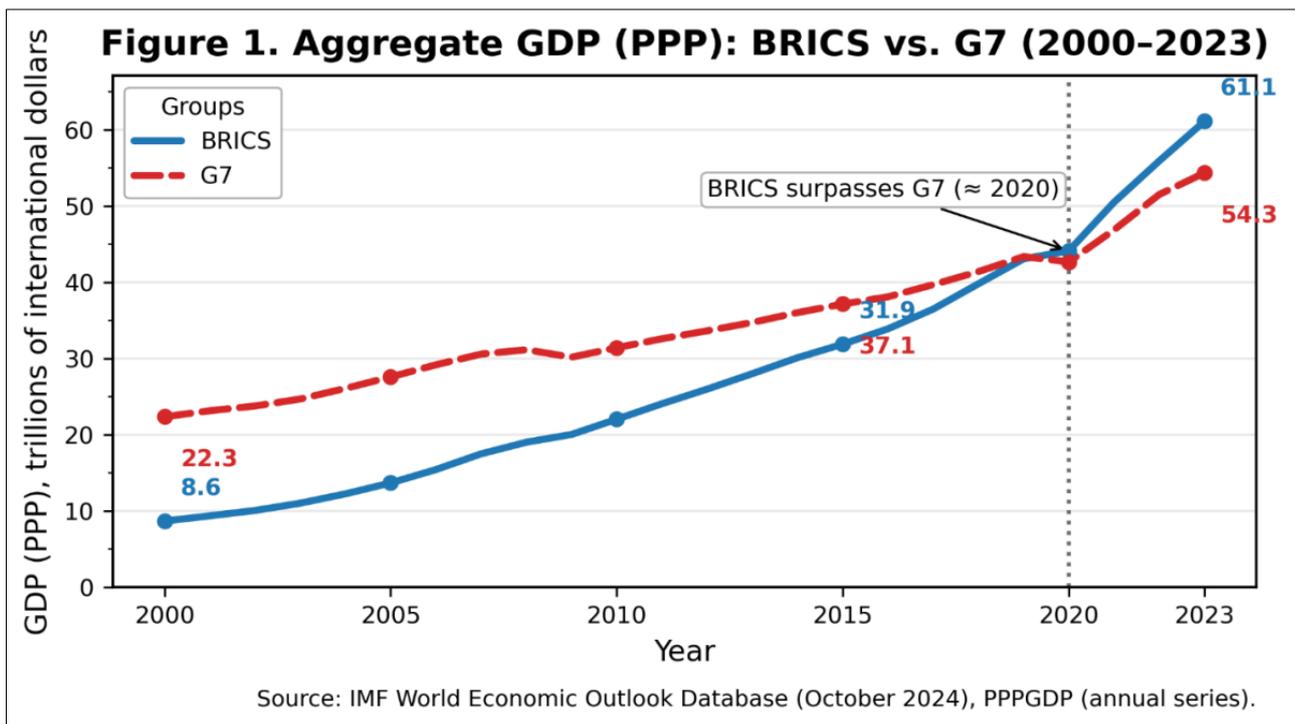
This methodology fits well into the study of institutional contestation and normative commitment change in global politics (Fioretos, 2022), as it focuses on context and description of the process of change and does not rely on testing a hypothesis, according to the goals of the paper, which are to provide an attentive description of a changing and disputed global order.

**III. The Rise of BRICS Causes, Purposes, and Constraints**

**Economic Label to Political Coalition**

BRICS was first coined by Goldman Sachs as an economic shorthand to refer to a group of emerging economies that are growing at a high pace (O'Neill, 2001). Its formation as a political coalition was gradual. Since 2006, with informal meetings of foreign ministers, the nations have had regular leaders' summits since 2009 and formally added South Africa in 2010. These measures transformed BRICS from a theoretical term to a structured block with common political interests, particularly reforms of international governance institutions (Stuenkel, 2015).

This trend reflects how key non-Western powers are translating economic growth into greater influence within international institutions. Instead of accepting the unipolar order that has prevailed after the Cold War, members of the BRICS organize to challenge the manner in which power is distributed in the current global order.



**Figure 1: Compares the combined share of the global GDP in purchasing-power parity (PPP) between the BRICS and the G7 countries in 2010 and 2024. The data illustrate the narrowing economic gap and highlight the material basis of the increased political power and institutional activeness of BRICS.**

Source: IMF WEO (2024).

**Strategic Autonomy and Institutional Influence**

The intentions of BRICS are deeper than anti-Western hegemony. This coalition aims at having a high level of strategic autonomy by diminishing its reliance on Western financial networks, media discourses, and U.S.-dominated security constructs (Hurrell, 2006; Acharya, 2014). This is done in a twofold approach.

First, BRICS advocates reforms in the current institutions, including more voting rights in the IMF and World Bank and more seats on the United Nations Security Council. Second, it constructs other institutions, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). These options

provide developmental financing and liquidity assistance with fewer political strings attached than customary Bretton Woods lenders (Stuenkel, 2015; Fiori & Vieira, 2014).

Collectively, these measures enable BRICS to play within the existing system and at the same time establish alternatives outside of it. The coalition does not pull out completely but plays a game of participation and selective competition in institutions.

**Antagonistic Normative Viewpoints**

BRICS also favors a different view of the world order based on political pluralism. Its emphasis on multipolarity is a matter of power change and denial of one political or developmental paradigm to all. Based on postcolonial concepts, BRICS rhetoric focuses on sovereignty, non-intervention, and appreciation of various historical and cultural trajectories (Bhabha, 1994; Mignolo, 2011).

This position contradicts the Universalist principles of the Liberal International Order. Instead of a unified set of norms, BRICS proposes a model where various political structures and developmental policies will be able to coexist without external imposition (Escobar, 2018). Although the post echoes throughout much of the Global South, it begs the question of how pluralism is to be balanced with accountability and common standards.

**Internal Contradictions and Constraints**

BRICS is not a unitary actor even though it has a unified rhetoric. The variation in the political systems, regional interests, and relative power influence the behavior of the coalition and constrain its cohesion. The most prominent one is between India and China. Longstanding problems of the border, as well as contradictory ambitions, especially in the Indo-Pacific, complicate a classic strategic location. Such divisions tend to impede the reaction of BRICS to significant security crises, including the war between Russia and Ukraine (Barma, Ratner, and Weber, 2012; Chaturvedi, 2014).

The diversity in politics is also a source of tension. Brazil, South Africa, and India are democratic, and China and Russia are authoritarian. Despite the

emphasis on non-interference by all its members, democratic members often interact with liberal norms that are criticized by the bloc (Paris, 2014). This difference means that the unity among BRICS is not grounded in the shared ideology but rather in the shared discontent with the domination of the West. Therefore, BRICS has a challenge that is both critical and delicate. It is not based on a well-developed vision of change but rather on shared resistance to the status quo.

**IV. Contested Areas BRICS and Western Institutions Finance of Institutional Competition and Development**

The establishment of the New Development Bank and the growth of the Belt and Road Initiative in China are direct threats to Western-dominated development institutions, including the World Bank. These projects are offered as South-South cooperation to consolidate financial and political relationships throughout Africa, Latin America, and Asia, thereby weakening the leverage of the West in these areas (Huang, 2016; Joffe, 2015).

The NDB, specifically, satisfies the long-standing requests of increased autonomy in financing development. It also offers loans with fewer political strings and shorter approval times, which makes it attractive to governments that are frustrated by the Bretton Woods limitations (Fiori & Vieira, 2014; Gallagher and Irwin, 2015).

This is an institutional competition that is particularly appealing to large developing states in pursuit of flexibility in external partnerships. The BRICS-led projects concentrate on national ownership and sovereignty, which suit the interests of these states and allow them to switch between the forums and enjoy the benefits of competing systems (Narlikar, 2010).

The West has replied with efforts like the Build Back Better World of the G7 and the Global Gateway of the EU, acknowledging that development finance is a major field of geopolitical competition (Ba and Hoffmann, 2018). At stake are not only infrastructure funding but also the larger issue of which model of development will determine future relations with the Global South (and what political assumptions will be made) (Stuenkel, 2015; Mawdsley, 2012).

**Table 1: Institutional Competition in Development Finance: World Bank vs. New Development Bank**

Dimension	World Bank	New Development Bank (NDB)
<b>Institutional Role</b>	One of the fundamental institutions of the Bretton Woods system, reform discussions are concerned with how the current order is represented, how it votes, and the rules of decision-making in the current order.	An international development bank established by BRICS to increase financing facilities and lessen dependence on the Western-led institutions.
<b>Founding Logic</b>	It was founded following World War II and aimed at development under the leadership of the Western countries based on rules and institutions.	Developed as an extra development financing mechanism to work alongside the existing institutions, which have different priorities.

Dimension	World Bank	New Development Bank (NDB)
<b>Governance Structure</b>	Voting weighted voting power favors long-standing capital contributors; the Western states have always dominated leadership and agenda-setting.	Structured to be more equal in influence between founding members, indicating an attempt to make voices more equal.
<b>Lending Approach</b>	Finance is typically linked to policy frameworks, reform of the institution, and adherence to best practice standards at the time.	Funding in the form of a borrower, with priorities on national interests and state sovereignty.
<b>Conditionality</b>	Based on formal policy, governance, and procedural terms that are associated with loans and project approval.	Uses fewer explicit political conditions, which give preference to flexibility, speed, and use of domestic systems.
<b>Project Focus</b>	Generalized mandates such as poverty alleviation, social sectors, institutional capacity-building, response to crisis, and infrastructure.	High emphasis on infrastructural development and mega development programs that relate to economic development.
<b>Normative Orientation</b>	Tries to change the global development system internally and keep the liberal institutional order.	Encourages other institutional routes and criticizes the notion of one dominant development model.
<b>Political Perception</b>	Usually perceived as technocratic, but also as a representation of Western policy preferences.	Offered as a model of South-South cooperation, which focuses on sovereignty and non-interference.
<b>Source of Influence</b>	Rule-based power, normative power, and conditional access to finance.	Power is based on offering substitutes, making the states' borrowing more powerful.

**Table 1.** The comparison of the World Bank and the New Development Bank also shows how BRICS tackles institutional change in two ways. It demonstrates how new powers are disrupting established authority not only by trying to gain more influence in long-established organizations but also by establishing new institutions with new governance structures, lending practices, and strategic priorities (Stuenkel, 2015; Fiori & Vieira, 2014; Acharya, 2017; Gallagher & Irwin, 2015).

#### Geopolitical Hotspots and Strategic Congruence

Differences within BRICS are evident in situations of actual geopolitical crises. During such times the unity of the bloc and the capability of the West to marshal a world response are put to the test. As an example, the West issued a collective statement on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and imposed comprehensive sanctions. Conversely, some of the BRICS nations assumed a non-aligned or neutral position, condemning the expansion of NATO without directly supporting the invasion (Mearsheimer, 2001; Joffe, 2015).

The other tensions arise due to the activity of China in the South China Sea and its unresolved border conflict with India. The disagreements show internal divisions in BRICS and a threat to U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing is framing its actions as a defense of sovereign rights, a story that resonates with most states of the Global South and that is still being criticized by Western governments (Zhang & Smith, 2014; Barma, Ratner, and Weber, 2012).

Collectively, these cases indicate that BRICS is not a military alliance. But its members are able to

provide one another with diplomatic support and economic options. Diversified energy trade between Russia, China, and India has served to cushion the effect of Western sanctions. This collaboration weakens political seclusion and implies that the coercive instruments of the liberal order are becoming ineffective in the multipolar world (Acharya, 2017; Stuenkel, 2015).

#### V. The Liberal International Order Crisis Domestic Tensions in the West

The Liberal International Order crisis cannot be attributed only to the outside forces. Domestically, within Western states, political changes have torn the order. Democratic backsliding and increasing doubt about multilateral institutions and populist nationalism, such as America First and Brexit, undermine consensus even in the West itself (Ikenberry, 2011; Zakaria, 2008).

With these trends, the West is not able to project a coherent and authentic idea of liberal governance. With the increasing internal divisions, the moral authority and persuasiveness of the liberal model diminish, in particular among non-Western states (Acharya, 2014; Ba and Hoffmann, 2018).

#### External Contestation BRICS as a Strategic Challenger

BRICS exploits the weak points of the West. BRICS does not reject the Liberal International Order outright but frequently criticizes it on its own terms. The appeals to fairness, representation, and equality decry the structures of governance both at the IMF and the World Bank, which continue to show archaic power distributions (Hurrell, 2006; Stuenkel, 2015).

The BRICS also focuses on sovereignty and non-intervention, which are officially endorsed values of the existing system, to forestall outside criticism of national politics or human rights actions (Acharya, 2014; Mamdani, 2020). This highlights the gap between the LIO's Universalist claims and their selective application. Therefore, Western reactions find it difficult to refute such criticisms without strengthening a sense of inconsistency.

### **Fragmentation and the Development of a Multiplex System**

A combination of internal erosion and external pressure adds to the pace of a transition to what Acharya terms a multiplex global order. This system is characterized by overlapping institutions, competing norms, and many centers of authority instead of one hierarchy (Acharya, 2017).

Fragmentation manifests itself in numerous spheres. Negotiations on climate change, trade, and security are currently conducted on forums that are more or less disconnected. In some regions, some old alliances become deeper, and economic decoupling and technology-driven protectionism increase in others (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). What is produced is a more complicated and random system where power is decentralized and conditional rather than central.

## **VI. Collaboration, Co-existence, and Future Directions**

### **Selective Cooperation in Rivalry Conditions**

Although there is competition, collaboration is inevitable in areas with strong interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977/2012). The BRICS states and the Western governments have synchronized their efforts in both the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic and are still collaborating on climate change and nuclear non-proliferation.

This collaboration cannot be regarded as political alignment. Instead, it is a practical understanding of mutual weaknesses. This duality is depicted in the war in Ukraine. Despite escalating sanctions, Russia, Turkey, and the UN continued to negotiate, which resulted in the Black Sea Grain Initiative. This episode demonstrates how a certain issue-focused cooperation may coexist with a bigger conflict.

### **Global Order Possible Trajectories**

The combination of these forces creates a number of probable futures, which are influenced by the ability of the West to reform, the position of China in the BRICS, and the strategic actions of the Global South.

### **Scenario 1: Managed Pluralism**

In this case, such as the redistribution of IMF voting shares or Security Council representation lessen the pressure to an out-and-out institutional bypass. The members of BRICS, particularly China, are concerned

with exerting an influence on an altered system and not entirely depending on new structures. Older institutions are still present alongside new ones such as the NDB and the CRA to form a complicated but functional arrangement. Issues are dealt with in flexible forums like the G20, resulting in incremental, issue-specific trade-offs.

### **Scenario 2: Bifurcated Blocks**

A more polarized result is possible when Western reactions get securitized and China takes a stronger stance in BRICS. In these circumstances, the international system can be divided into competing fields of technology, economy, and ideology, compelling other states to become more strictly aligned and restricting their strategic freedom (Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

### **Scenario 3: Disorder in Pieces**

Unless the West or the BRICS are able to unify leadership, the world may be characterized by institutional stalemates and ad hoc formations. Power would devolve to regional blocks and issue-based solutions, which would enhance the costs of coordination and reduce the capacity to address international crises.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The rise of BRICS reflects a clear loss of authority within the Liberal International Order (LIO). This change is not merely a modification in economic or material authority but also an increasingly difficult challenge to rules, institutions, and assumptions that have been traditionally at the heart of Western leadership of the global order. This paper has shown that the BRICS and the West interaction has become the focal point of the entire world realignment process and that what was initially viewed as economic nomenclature has evolved into a political initiative that highlights the long-standing shortcomings of the LIO, such as low representation, unequal legitimacy, and selective application of liberal norms.

At the same time, BRICS does not represent a unified or fully formed alternative to the existing order. The problem of internal divisions, especially the strategic rivalry between China and India and the sheer difference of the political systems of its members, inhibits its performance as a single, coherent force. Instead of the replacement of Western leadership as such, an environment of competition and concurrent cooperation is emerging due to the strategic actions of Global South states that gradually hedge their alignments and selectively interact with various institutions.

This results in the disintegration of the international system, with authority being distributed among intermingling institutions and rival constructions. Instead of hierarchy, global governance is being negotiated on the issues of sovereignty, development policy, and emergent policy lines such as digital governance.

One of the major problems of modern statecraft is the control of such an environment, where governments must balance structural competition without endangering cooperation in the fields of collective action where such action is most important, including climate change, global health, and financial stability. It is not possible to eradicate rivalry but rather to ensure it does not cause harm to the basic operations of the international system.

In the future, three aspects will have a particularly strong impact. The first is the capacity of the Western states to seek useful internal revitalization and provide plausible institutional change. Second is how China plays in the BRICS, specifically whether China is balancing its increasing influence with actual partnering. Third and final is the joint action of the larger Global South, whose refusal to commit permanently to the action of any of the blocs constrains the birth of a new bipolar order.

The global system that is taking shape will not be defined by the clear triumph of one model over another. Instead, it will reflect ongoing tension between reformed legacy institutions and newer alternatives such as the New Development Bank, as states move between them to advance their interests. What is now clear is that the Liberal International Order no longer enjoys uncontested authority. The future of world governance will be determined by practical decision-making, compromised negotiation, and the coexistence of various roads in a more competitive world.

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