



Locating the BRICS in the EU's vision: a case for cooperation over competition

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Summary

- The inclusion of new members, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, in the BRICS framework starting from January 2024 has raised concerns among Western governments. The energy-centric nature of these new members adds to the unease.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts a significant shift in global economic power, with the BRICS expected to account for 37.3% of the world's GDP by 2024, compared to the European Union's 14.5%. Questions arise about how the EU views the BRICS, how the bloc can/should engage with them, and whether there is room for cooperation between the two entities.
- The BRICS has evolved beyond being solely an economic grouping. It advocates for reforming global institutions and has also developed a security dimension, displaying a cohesive stance on issues like terrorism and expressing scepticism towards Western approaches.
- The BRICS states are challenging the traditional Western approach to global security and stability. They emphasize diplomatic resolutions over the militarization of disputes, rejecting Western sanctions as impediments to state development. The BRICS' divergent stance on issues like the conflict in Ukraine showcases a clear departure from traditional Western security alliances.
- There are misinterpretations of the BRICS' objectives, with some suggesting it aims to establish an alternative world order. However, analysis of BRICS summit declarations indicates a desire for reform within the existing international structure, rather than for the creation of a new order. The media narrative may not fully reflect the nuanced and cooperative approach the BRICS states aim to pursue.
- Despite differences between the EU and BRICS in terms of political systems and values, historical examples demonstrate the EU's capacity to engage with diverse nations, such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, indicating that cooperation can transcend ideological disparities for mutual benefit.

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- The EU engages with BRICS nations individually, forming strategic partnerships with countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa. However, critics argue that these partnerships lack substantive depth and function more as aspirational goals than comprehensive strategic alliances.
- South Africa, with stable relations across the EU and the BRICS, is positioned as a potential broker between the two groups. However, its ongoing legal dispute with Israel at the ICJ poses a challenge to its envisioned role, and EU acceptance of South Africa's mediating role is crucial for success.

Introduction

The significance of the 'new' BRICS or BRICS+ remains a contentious issue. However, it can be stated with relative certainty that the evolution of the BRICS is causing concern, specifically among Western governments. This unease is accentuated by events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and compounded by the inclusion of seemingly 'un-democratic states' like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt into the BRICS framework starting from 1 January 2024.

The significance of the 'new' BRICS or BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates)¹ remains a contentious issue. However, it can be stated with relative certainty that the evolution of the BRICS is causing concern, specifically among Western governments. This unease is accentuated by events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and compounded by the inclusion of seemingly 'un-democratic states' like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt into the BRICS framework starting from 1 January 2024 (Economic Observatory 20 October 2022). Additionally, Western concerns are exacerbated by the fact that these new BRICS states are very 'energy-centric' (Ismail 2023); indeed, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are three of the world's largest oil exporters (Baskaran & Cahill 25 August 2023). Western states may find this development alarming because it allows the aforementioned countries to lessen their reliance on conventional energy sources. Additionally, nations facing Western sanctions, like Iran, could potentially mitigate the consequences of these sanctions by engaging in trade with other BRICS members (Shahidsaless 31 August 2023). Along with this, discussion on the potential of the BRICS+ to pose a challenge to the dominance of the dollar has been growing, as highlighted by a commentary featuring in the Italian Institute for International Political Studies entitled 'A BRICS+ Challenge to the Dollar?' (Amighini 7 September 2023).

A further concern is the role the BRICS will play in the future. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union (EU) currently accounts for 14.5 per cent of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while by 2024 the BRICS will account for 37.3 per cent of the world's GDP. By 2028, the EU's share of the world's GDP may drop to 13.7 per cent, while the share of the BRICS will rise to 38.5 per cent (Ergöçün 2023). These statistics raise several pertinent questions that have only been vaguely addressed to date in literature such as: 'How does the EU view the BRICS?' 'How should the EU engage with the BRICS?' 'Is there room for cooperation between the EU and the BRICS as a whole?'²

This paper commences by offering a succinct overview of the evolution and expansion of the BRICS, which demonstrates how it has evolved into something more than a mere economic grouping. Thereafter, it offers a critical analysis of the prevalent misinterpretations surrounding the BRICS and sheds light on barriers that might impede cooperation between the EU and the BRICS. It also dissects the EU's perspective on the BRICS, with particular reference to the EU's strategic partnerships. Following this, the possibility of South Africa acting as a 'broker' between the EU and the BRICS is examined. The paper concludes with several recommendations that point to areas where there could be room for cooperation between the two blocks.

Building BRICS: from 'BRIC' to 'BRICS' then 'BRICS+'

When reflecting on the evolution of the BRICS, there are three important dates to consider: The first was in June 2009, when the BRIC group (without South Africa) met for the first time in Yekaterinburg, Russia, for its inaugural summit (Kirton & Larionova 2022). Although relations between these countries pre-date the Goldman Sachs report, it was largely Jim O'Neill's 2001 'Building Better Global Economic BRICs' report that ultimately

¹ As of 1 January 2024, the BRICS grouping includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Ethiopia, while Argentina, who was originally set to join has since back out (Africa News 2 January 2024).

² This policy paper does not a priori assume that cooperation is a given. Rather, it delves into potential areas where collaboration could be actively pursued, recognizing the mutual benefits for both groupings.

Such speculation is also reinforced by the BRICS having also seemingly evolved beyond a mere economic grouping, now advocating for the reform of global institutions and introducing tangible initiatives to bring such reform about.

The BRICS has also evolved in terms of its approach to peace and security. While the BRIC states were originally conceived through the lens of economics, this is arguably no longer the case.

coined and popularized the acronym 'BRIC'. The second important date is 2011, the year in which South Africa participated at the III BRICS Summit in Sanya, China, having been invited to join the BRIC grouping in 2010 (DIRCO 2023b). It was at this stage that the grouping expanded for the first time and became the BRICS. The third important date was August 2023: at the XV BRICS Summit, held in Johannesburg South Africa, the BRICS countries announced that six new members would officially join the BRICS as of January 2024: Argentina (it subsequently withdrew from plans to join), Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia (which has yet to officially join), and the UAE (El Dahan & Zhdannikov 18 January 2024). The latter date is particularly important, since the 'type' of countries that have joined the grouping has sparked media speculation that the new BRICS is advocating for an alternative world order.

Such speculation is also reinforced by the BRICS having also seemingly evolved beyond a mere economic grouping, now advocating for the reform of global institutions and introducing tangible initiatives to bring such reform about (Ndzendze & Zondi 31 August 2023). For example, at the II BRIC Summit in 2010, the group called for a "reformed and more stable financial architecture"; this was followed by the establishment of the BRICS New Development Bank in 2014 (BRICS Information Centre 2010; Masamba 13 July 2022).

The BRICS has also evolved in terms of its approach to peace and security. While the BRIC states were originally conceived through the lens of economics, this is arguably no longer the case. According to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, the 'security dimension' of the BRICS first became apparent in March 2011, when four out of the five BRICS states chose to abstain from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, which addressed the international response to Gaddafi's actions in Libya³ (Van Ham 2015: 1). The BRICS members who abstained from the vote held the view that there should be no military solution to the conflict in Libya and were cautious with regard to possible unintended consequences of an armed invasion (United Nations 17 March 2011).

The grouping espoused a more cohesive view once again in 2014, this time regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea. Brazil, China, India, and South Africa came out in support of Russia by abstaining from the UN General Assembly resolution (no.68/262) that criticized the Crimea referendum (Van Ham 2015: 1). While this is not to say that the grouping has always found a cohesive view on issues of security—in fact, there are differences on, for instance, the 'responsibility to protect'—the BRICS members share a common sense of caution when it comes to the use of force within the context of 'humanitarian intervention' (Daniel & Virk 2014: 22).

According to the Africa Policy Research Institute, "BRICS is challenging the EU's approach to global security and stability" (Vayez 2023). The BRICS states are taking increasingly clearer stances on global security issues such as terrorism, that may challenge the way the EU approaches them. For example, in the case of terrorism, in the first Joint Statement of the BRIC Leaders' summit in 2009, the issue of terrorism was only briefly and vaguely referred to, and the onus to address terrorism was seemingly relegated to the UN General Assembly, as evidenced below:

We strongly condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reiterate that there can be no justification for any act of terrorism anywhere or for whatever reasons. We note that the draft Comprehensive Convention against International Terrorism is currently under the consideration of the UN General Assembly and call for its urgent adoption (BRICS Information Centre 2009).

³ Brazil, India, China, and Russia abstained from the vote, while South Africa voted in favour.

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While the EU has traditionally relied on Western security alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to maintain stability, the BRICS is increasingly asserting itself as a global actor with distinct interests and values, particularly in the realm of global security issues such as terrorism.

This stands in sharp contrast to the manner in which terrorism is addressed in the XV Johannesburg Declaration, where terrorism was mentioned no fewer than 16 times. In addition, instead of delegating the role of combatting terrorism to other entities, the BRICS makes it clear that it is interested in combatting terrorism. For example, it:

Welcome[s] the activities of the BRICS Counterterrorism Working Groups and its five Subgroups based upon the BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the BRICS Counter-Terrorism Action Plan (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2023).

While the EU has traditionally relied on Western security alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to maintain stability, the BRICS is increasingly asserting itself as a global actor with distinct interests and values, particularly in the realm of global security issues such as terrorism (Vayez 2023). The current conflict in Ukraine stands out as a prominent example, highlighting as it does the divergent approaches to security taken by the EU and the BRICS. The EU has consistently advocated for the use of sanctions against Russia, a stance vehemently opposed by the BRICS (Ismail 22 August 2023). The BRICS, in general, harbours scepticism towards the effectiveness and ethical implications of sanctions deployed to enforce compliance with global norms, as in cases like Syria and Iran (Thakur 2014: 1797). Unilateral sanctions are perceived by the BRICS as impediments to the rise and development of states (Ismail 22 August 2023). Additionally, the BRICS reject the militarization of disputes and conflicts, preferring political resolutions through diplomatic negotiations over the Western tendency to intervene in states' internal affairs (Thakur 2014: 1797).

The fact that the BRICS' agenda has now shifted to also include a security component is not only reflected in the perception of itself espoused in its joint documents, but also in the manner in which other states view the BRICS; for example, on 6 November 2023, the foreign minister of Iran, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, wrote separate letters to the BRICS members urging the BRICS to intervene in an "active, constructive and responsible manner to stop the Israeli regime's war crimes against Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip" (Fars News Agency 6 November 2023). This call was seemingly heeded by South Africa who, on 29 December 2023, brought a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention (Novo 12 January 2024). In this sense, the BRICS has a security dimension. The evolution of the BRICS through the years has resulted in much speculation regarding the objectives and nature of the grouping. Several instances of such speculation will be discussed below in more detail.

(Mis)interpretations of the BRICS

There are varying opinions, views, and concerns about the BRICS. Some argue that the expanded BRICS will upend or overtake the Western-led international institutions, while others posit that the BRICS grouping lacks vision, coherence, or identity and is thus meaningless (Poast 1 September 2023). Generally, two main concerns tend to surface in the Western media in the narrative regarding BRICS.

The Objectives of the BRICS: a 'new' versus a 'reformed' world order

One of the primary concerns expressed—especially in the Western media discourse—is that the BRICS is trying to develop an alternative or new global order⁴. A few headlines from Western news outlets quoted below exemplify this:

Table 1: News headlines from Western news outlets

News outlet	News headline
Deutsche Welle (29 March 2023)	BRICS nations offer a new world order as alternative to the West
The Nation (27 June 2023)	How BRICS countries help to define a truly New World Order
Impakter (17 July 2023)	BRICS Summit 2023: The quest for a New World Order
Council of Councils (31 August 2023)	The BRICS Summit 2023: seeking an Alternate World Order?
World Politics Review (1 September 2023)	BRICS' expansion is aimed at upending the Western-led Order

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However, newspaper headlines of this sort, which largely frame the narrative on the BRICS, do not necessarily reflect the stance of the BRICS states themselves. In their piece on 'BRICS and Global Order', Wu and Marggraff (2023) analyse the related speeches and joint BRICS summit declarations between 2017 and 2023 and suggest that this is not the case. Rather:

The phrase 'global order' hardly features in the documents surveyed, besides the occasional call for greater multipolarity. Instead, the group seeks to work within the current international structure (created in 1945). In this way, the BRICS—like NATO-aligned states—seek to protect the 'rules-based order'; only, how this order is interpreted and who stands for peace and prosperity, differs. The group believes that states have deviated from the international system, and thus the BRICS states seek to reinvigorate or return to it (Wu & Marggraff 2023).

What the BRICS member states truly want is a world order that is more in tune with the needs of developing countries. In the XV Johannesburg Declaration, the BRICS explained that:

We support a comprehensive reform of the UN, including its Security Council, with a view to making it more democratic, representative, effective and efficient [...] so that it can adequately respond to prevailing global challenges and support the legitimate aspirations of emerging and developing countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America (The Presidency of South Africa 2023).

⁴ As a caveat, it must be noted that this concern has been more prevalent in media reports as opposed to reports disseminated by Think Tanks. A search of the database of leading European Think Tanks, including the German Council on Foreign Relations, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Stockholm International Peace Research Centre, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bruegel, and European Union Institute for Security Studies, using the keyword 'BRICS' in 2023, yielded just three results with the word 'BRICS' in their titles.

While the BRICS definitely want to 'reform' the world order, they do not necessarily want to 'transform' it. The word 'reform' implies that one still wants to work within the system, despite seeking to change certain aspects of it.

In an interview conducted with Sanusha Naidu, a Senior Researcher with the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) on 17 January 2024, she affirmed this, stating that care needs to be taken with regards to the language used. While the BRICS definitely want to 'reform' the world order, they do not necessarily want to 'transform' it. The word 'reform' implies that one still wants to work within the system, despite seeking to change certain aspects of it.

In this sense, the dominant narrative that suggests the BRICS want to recreate a new world order is perhaps slightly amiss. Any related claims that the BRICS is necessarily anti-West also need to be carefully reconsidered. Just because the countries that are joining the BRICS happen to be countries that have opposing (or different) values to Western states does not a priori prove that the grouping is anti-West. On a bilateral level, several, if not the majority, of BRICS member states continue to maintain relations with the West. A case in point is South Africa. On the eve of the XV BRICS Summit, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, in a rare address to the nation on South Africa's foreign policy, made it clear that South Africa's involvement with the BRICS does not mean it is neglecting its other partners, such as the US and the EU:

To further strengthen economic ties between African countries and the United States, South Africa is inviting more than 30 African trade ministers and senior US Administration and Congressional representatives to the next forum of the African Growth and Opportunity Act—AGOA—scheduled for November this year. As part of our ongoing relationship with the countries of the European Union, we will hold the European Union-South Africa Summit later this year in South Africa to foster our investment and trade relations. Recent trade statistics indicate the success of all our international links (Ramaphosa 2023).

A further example of a country maintaining ties with both BRICS states and Western states is India. In May 2023, the EU and India held their first EU-India Trade and Technology Council in Brussels, with three Indian Ministers and four European commissioners present.

A further example of a country maintaining ties with both BRICS states and Western states is India. In May 2023, the EU and India held their first EU-India Trade and Technology Council in Brussels, with three Indian Ministers and four European commissioners present (Birchard 16 May 2023). This was preceded by an exchange of visits earlier in the year between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Apart from discussing the revitalization of the EU-India free trade agreement, they also discussed cooperation on security and defence (Jain & Sims 25 February 2023). These are just two examples which demonstrate that involvement in BRICS does not imply non-involvement with the West or, specifically, the EU.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the main aim of BRICS is not to establish an organization or grouping that is anti-West. Rather, the BRICS states' main aim is to pursue development and cooperation, and to address common global challenges. In the Johannesburg Declaration, 'development' is mentioned no fewer than 78 times and 'cooperation' no fewer than 77 times. The BRICS countries pursue cooperation in a wide array of fields, ranging from cooperation on Nuclear Medicine (BRICS Working Group on Nuclear Medicine) to the BRICS Alliance for Green Tourism, the BRICS Counterterrorism Working Group, the BRICS Virtual Vaccine Research and Development Centre, the BRICS Technology Transfer Training Program, and the BRICS Energy Research Cooperation Platform (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2023).

It is important to bear in mind that there is a difference between what the BRICS countries articulate in their official speeches and publications versus the narrative the media projects. Conflating the two can lead to misunderstandings and obscure the reality. It can also lead to the unnecessary and premature polarization of an 'us' versus 'them', a 'BRICS' versus 'the West' in which the two sides are viewed as polar opposites. For example, in an

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article published in the Italian Journal of International Affairs, Schirm (2023: 55) points out that core actors from the 'Southern World Order' (SWO)—the BRICS states—are often positioned as standing in contrast to the Western Liberal International Order. Similarly, various publications by European Think Tanks point to a similar tension between the BRICS and the West. A commentary piece published by the Elcano Royal Institute posited a confrontation between Western liberal democracies and non-Western autocracies (Ortega 12 July 2022). An article by the French Institute of International Relations (2023) has as its title 'The South versus the West?'; when framed in such a manner, this may prematurely foreclose the possibility of initiating talks on potential areas of cooperation between the two groups.

The BRICS and the West: polar opposites?

Additionally, there seems to be a perception that the values promoted by the BRICS are antithetical to the values promoted by the West, and by extension the EU. One analysis, for example, hones in on the fact that many of the original BRICS member states are not democracies. China is described as being an authoritarian single-party regime, Russia an authoritarian democracy, Brazil a democracy with an authoritarian past, India a democracy that once experimented with authoritarianism, and South Africa a country with a problematic democracy (Srinivasan 2014: 32). The expanded BRICS group's average Freedom House score (in terms of political rights and civil liberties) has dropped from 48.4 per cent to 36.7 per cent (Fabricius 29 August 2023). On this note, it must be stated that while democracy may be a point of divergence between the EU and the BRICS, this has not necessarily stopped the EU from engaging with actors in the past. For example, despite obvious differences, the EU has, and continues to pursue, bilateral relations with China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Russia (which receives more than 70 per cent of the EU's investment in the GCC; Delegation of the European Union to the United Arab Emirates 2023). In addition, before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia was the EU's third largest trading partner, and the EU was Russia's largest trading partner (Kapoor 11 March 2021). This perhaps demonstrates an understanding on the EU's part that cooperation does not require complete ideological alignment and that engagement need not be determined by a single value. In fact, cooperation is often more effective at impacting the policies and practices of other states than isolating them. Furthermore, Naidu (2024) points out that, ultimately, "the argument that cooperation needs to synchronize with values is flawed, since at the end of the day it is the interests that drive the relationships".

Another example is the EU's strategic partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2022, the two actors commemorated more than 45 years of cooperation despite their continuing to differ on several issues (Bomassi 2023). One of those is the issue of democracy: thus, while democracy is codified in EU treaties, ASEAN comprises a range of different political systems. Apart from this, there are many other differences in the organizational makeup of the respective bodies. For example, ASEAN does not have a single currency or customs union and its objectives are more oriented to serving as a coordinating body for the region (Bomassi 2023). Furthermore, it has no binding or enforcement power and adheres to the principle of non-intervention in member states' affairs. This stands in sharp contrast to the highly integrated and institutionalized nature of the EU. In this light, it could then be suggested that opposing values, and even opposing institutional makeups, have not stopped bilateral engagement elsewhere, so why should such differences stand as a major obstacle to engagement between the EU and BRICS as a whole? Furthermore, Naidu (2024) points out that when the EU was originally formed it was not immediately a fully-fledged, highly institutionalized organization but began with a set of economic cooperation agreements. The EU's

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integration and development into the political and economic union it is today was incremental and took place over decades (Naidu 2024). Analogously, recognizing the BRICS as still being in its early stages of development becomes imperative for understanding and fostering engagement.

Lastly, it could be argued that if the BRICS and EU cannot find synergy over values, then they can at least find synergy over shared or mutual interests. In *The Origin of Alliances* (1987: 38), Stephen Walt famously explains that “security considerations are likely to take precedence over ideological preferences, and ideologically based alliances are unlikely to survive when more pragmatic interests intrude.” Without proposing that the BRICS and EU form an alliance, it might be worthwhile to suggest that cooperation between the EU and the BRICS need not be driven by shared values (ideological preferences) but proceed instead through shared interests. This is also important, since one cannot always have the luxury of picking which countries to work with when faced with the ticking time bomb of issues like climate change that need to be addressed without delay (Naidu 17 January 2024). Having addressed some of the misunderstandings concerning the aims and intentions of BRICS, the next section seeks to provide a nuanced view of how the EU views BRICS.

How does the EU view the BRICS?

...the EU does not recognize the BRICS as a group in the sense that it does not have an EU strategy or policy directed at the grouping as a whole (Hooimaaijers & Keukeleire 2020: 7). The second way to understand how the EU views the BRICS, therefore, is to look at how the EU as a whole views the BRICS states individually. The final way of comprehending the EU's stance towards the BRICS is to examine the individual perspectives of EU member states, organized into specific groupings, towards each of the BRICS nations.

How the EU views the BRICS can be understood in three ways. In this first instance, we look at how the EU as a whole views the BRICS as a whole. However, it must be noted that the EU does not recognize the BRICS as a group in the sense that it does not have an EU strategy or policy directed at the grouping as a whole (Hooimaaijers & Keukeleire 2020: 7). The second way to understand how the EU views the BRICS, therefore, is to look at how the EU as a whole views the BRICS states individually. The final way of comprehending the EU's stance towards the BRICS is to examine the individual perspectives of EU member states, organized into specific groupings, towards each of the BRICS nations.

How the EU as a whole view the BRICS members states individually

The EU has recognized countries like Brazil, India and South Africa alongside its pre-existing partnerships with Russia and China, establishing them as ‘strategic partners’ despite the absence of a defined EU strategy vis-à-vis the group as a whole. These partnerships were initiated in the mid-1990s through various agreements: the EU and Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994 (effective from 1997, subject to annual extensions), EU-India relations were founded on a Cooperation Agreement in 1994, the EU-China relationship operates under the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, EU-Brazil has had a Framework Cooperation Agreement since 1992, and EU-South Africa has maintained a Trade and Development Cooperation Agreement since 1999. The impetus to formalize these relations as ‘strategic partnerships’ emerged out of the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003, whereby the EU identified six significant allies and emphasized stronger ties with three nations: Russia, China, and India. Formal alliances were established with China, Russia, and India at the 2003–2004 summits, while partnerships with Brazil and South Africa were formalized in 2007. Presently, the EU has ten strategic partnerships, including Canada, Japan, Korea, and Mexico.

However, critics contend that these partnerships function more as aspirational goals and do not reflect genuine strategic depth. They are described as lacking substantive

contributions from the EU with a view to fostering unified global perspectives or rectifying deficiencies in strategic conduct. The agreements and action plans formed with these partners often appear to be lists of policy areas rather than cohesive endeavours towards specific objectives, reflecting the limited impact of the EU's foreign policy vis-à-vis crises, conflicts, or setting international norms.

How the constituent states of the EU view the BRICS individually

As was mentioned above, instead of viewing the BRICS as a whole, the EU has continued to engage with BRICS members on a bilateral level. One of the few analyses of the relationship between the EU and the BRICS states that “neither side has expressed ambition or interest in engaging as a multilateral grouping nor do they have a multilateral strategy towards the other” (Vayez 2023). Considering this, the third way to understand how the EU views the BRICS is to look how the constituent states within the EU view the BRICS states.

Belgium, Germany, France, and Austria navigate the intricate web of international relations with the BRICS states in slightly different ways. Belgium exhibits a multifaceted approach to international relations, evident through the historical ties and substantial trade it has with Brazil, its joint research initiatives with South Africa, and its strategic partnerships with China. These relationships span trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange, emphasizing Belgium's significant role in the global economic landscape. In contrast, Germany's *Strategy on China* (2023) marks a shift in approach, with the new strategy seeking to balance economic ties with security concerns, refusing the 2020 EU-China' proposed Comprehensive investment agreement which former German chancellor Angela Merkel had once promoted, and emphasizing relations with Taiwan while actively engaging with India (McElwee & Mazzocco 2023). For its part, France maintains a strategic alliance with India, focusing on mutual concerns regarding Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean, while Macron's trip to China in April 2023 was predicated on the belief that the EU must pursue an independent policy from the US (Hale 5 April 2023). This is evident in France's efforts to address the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Europe and strengthen commercial ties with China (Brzozowski & Xia 1 May 2023). Furthermore, France's distinct approach to Russia and recent engagements with China, Ukraine and Brazil showcase its nuanced global outlook. Austria, meanwhile, prioritizes strong economic relations with these nations, emphasizing trade, technology, and innovation. Its involvement in vocational training discussions with South Africa suggests a willingness to expand collaborations beyond Europe. Overall, these four countries' diverse engagements underscore a complex and interconnected landscape shaped by evolving geopolitical strategies, economic interests, and diplomatic initiatives.

Turning to Scandinavia, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland have shifted away from engaging with BRICS states such as China and Russia in favour of engagement with South Africa, India, and Brazil. Relationships with China have witnessed a substantial shift, moving from economic collaborations initially to a more cautious stance. These nations have increasingly come to perceive China as a 'systemic rival' due to security concerns and human rights issues, prompting re-evaluations of their alliances (Forsby 22 June 2022). This shift is evident in measures such as the restrictions placed on Chinese tech engagement, investment screening systems, and changes in direction regarding diplomatic discussions on sensitive political matters (Reuters 6 May 2021) as well as policies regarding the Arctic region (Eiterjord 30 November 2023). Additionally, Finland has redirected its trade focus from Russia to Brazil after severing ties in the light of the conflict in Ukraine (and thus abandoning its historical stance of neutrality). Its aim now is to expand trade avenues and leverage expertise in areas including renewable energy and

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Turning to Scandinavia, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland have shifted away from engaging with BRICS states such as China and Russia in favour of engagement with South Africa, India, and Brazil.

For their part, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have cultivated relations with the BRICS countries.

Southern European EU members, including states such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta, have predominantly shifted their trade relations away from China and Russia in favour of fostering trade ties with India and Brazil.

mining equipment (AP 12 October 2023). In fact, Finland has been viewed as a 'hostile' country by Russia since it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2023 (AP 12 October 2023). India's diplomatic interactions with the Nordic nations and Denmark, and in particular the Green Strategic Partnership established in 2020, signify deeper collaborations centred on renewable energy, environmental policies, trade, and technology. South Africa and Denmark currently have two ongoing Strategic Sector Cooperation programs, one focusing on water and the other on smart and sustainable urban development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark 2023).

For their part, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have cultivated relations with the BRICS countries. China's engagement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) through the '16+1' framework over the last decade initially promised economic opportunities, but the anticipated benefits failed to materialize fully, leading to disappointment in Chinese investments. Concerns grew as China wielded its influence politically, notably pressuring nations in the region over their relations with Taiwan (Kaczynski 15 August 2022). Recent support for Russia's proposals regarding European security has further fuelled apprehension among CEE nations, particularly as they perceive NATO and the US as vital security providers (Brinza 2 August 2023). The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has intensified divisions within Europe, with countries such as Bulgaria and Hungary demonstrating an unexpected sympathy for Russia driven by disillusionment with Western promises, economic struggles, and the influence of social media. This discord underscores the urgent need for the EU to address these divisions, counter propaganda, and bolster its ability to combat misinformation. Amidst these shifts, India's nuanced stance to Russia, which is driven by its diverse interests, emphasizes its strategic alignment with Moscow in a bid to counterbalance China's growing ties in the region. At the same time, India is expanding its own diplomatic and economic connections in Central and Eastern Europe, aligning with its global leadership aspirations and strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific region (Kamath 13 September 2021).

Southern European EU members, including states such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta, have predominantly shifted their trade relations away from China and Russia in favour of fostering trade ties with India and Brazil. Recent diplomatic engagements between Spain and India have accentuated their focus on fortifying bilateral relations, especially in the defence and security domains, highlighted by Airbus's attempts to penetrate the Indian market (Nikolov 26 November 2023). Spain's keen interest in the Indo-Pacific and collaboration with Brazil solidifies their strategic alliances, while both strained relations with Russia contrast sharply with their stance on China, which aligns with the EU's position (Blanco *et al.* 27 April 2023). Portugal's shift away from cosy relations with China underlines a recalibration towards NATO commitments driven by concerns over the political ramifications of Chinese investments (Sheridan 8 September 2023). Italy's disillusionment with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led to a decision to withdraw and forge closer ties with India instead, elevating their relationship to a strategic partnership. (Zeneli 10 December 2023). Athens' evolving diplomacy underscores strengthened ties with India and Brazil and positions Greece strategically amidst conflicts, notably by supporting Ukraine. Greece has also reinforced relations with Romania and the US, emphasizing its emergence as a significant defence and energy hub in a complex global landscape (Michalopoulos & Michalopoulos 2023). Overall, the dynamic geopolitical landscape in Southern Europe reflects a discernible shift in trade and diplomatic orientations, as countries like Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece pivot towards strengthening ties with India and Brazil. This recalibration, marked by a move away from China and Russia, underscores a strategic alignment with safeguarding their interests in the Indo-Pacific region, defence collaborations, and a collective commitment to navigating

the complexities of the global stage in line with the broader EU strategic interdependence dogma.

In conclusion, the EU's approach to the BRICS nations is characterized by a nuanced and diverse set of strategies at both the collective EU level and the individual member-state level. While the EU does not have a unified strategy towards the BRICS as a group, it has established strategic partnerships with individual BRICS members. However, these partnerships are often criticized for lacking substantive depth and unified global perspectives. Within the EU, member states exhibit varied approaches to the BRICS nations which reflect their distinct geopolitical priorities, economic interests, and diplomatic initiatives. As the global landscape evolves, the EU and its member states will continue to navigate the complexities of international relations, balancing engagements with the BRICS countries on bilateral terms and adapting their strategies to the shifting dynamics of the geopolitical arena.

Broadly, the preceding observations highlight a growing perception within the EU of China as a threat, amplifying concerns among member states. Simultaneously, relations with Russia are currently more strained than ever. In contrast, there is a noticeable uptick in the attention being paid to Brazil and India by various EU members.

South Africa as the 'broker': connecting the EU to the BRICS

Broadly, the preceding observations highlight a growing perception within the EU of China as a threat, amplifying concerns among member states. Simultaneously, relations with Russia are currently more strained than ever. In contrast, there is a noticeable uptick in the attention being paid to Brazil and India by various EU members. One country that has not been discussed extensively, however, is South Africa. Both South Africa and most European states are firmly committed to a rules-based international order and to peace as a prerequisite for development. South Africa explains in its *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and Its Advancement in a Global Environment* (2022) that there can be "no development without peace and no peace without development." Along with this shared commitment to the rules-based international order with the EU, South Africa has stable relations with most EU member states.

Germany is South Africa's third-biggest trade partner and the third-largest source of overseas tourists to South Africa (Pandor 2023). The relationship with France is rooted in sectors such as energy, defence, health, and trade and investment (DIRCO 2023a). In terms of its relations with Southern Europe, South Africa has signed an Agreement on Defence Cooperation with Portugal which allows for information exchange in areas relating to peacekeeping and the defence of borders and maritime spaces (SA News 6 June 2023). South Africa maintains similarly strong relations with Spain, and there are well-established bilateral economic ties between the two (SA News 28 October 2022). Perhaps the grouping with which South Africa has the weakest ties are the countries of Central and Eastern Europe—although this also varies from state to state. For example, while South Africa little to no relations with Latvia, its ties with Poland (barring the diplomatic incidents of early 2023⁵) are strong in the field of human rights and protections (Government of Poland n.d.). While this paper does not delve into an exhaustive examination of South Africa's relations with every EU member state, it is apparent that, overall, South Africa maintains stable diplomatic ties with the majority of EU nations. This observation suggests that South Africa may be well-positioned to assume a pivotal role as a mediator between the EU and the BRICS.

⁵ Upon their arrival in Poland, the South African president's security detail and press crew were detained due to the alleged presence of 'dangerous materials' and 'undeclared persons.' Resultantly, the South African president had to proceed to his next stop, Kyiv, without both his guards and the South African journalists (Lesedi 17 June 2023).

That South Africa has been able to manage its long-standing relations with Russia and China, while also maintaining its relations with Western partners such as the United States (US) and the EU would enhance its legitimacy as a mediator that can balance the interests and concerns of both the EU and the BRICS. The trust that has been established through its strong relations with a wide range of partners could lend credence to its role as a broker.

Having introduced South Africa, it is worth noting that the expansion of the BRICS to include other African countries such as Ethiopia and Egypt may have diminished the significance of South Africa's role within the BRICS. Arguably, South Africa can no longer be considered the sole voice of the continent in the grouping. In this sense, while it may have lost its primacy as Africa's only BRICS member, we posit that this perhaps opens up an alternative position for South Africa, not as a 'bridge-builder' between the BRICS and African countries but as a 'broker' between the EU and BRICS. South Africa is in a position to play this unique role, thanks both to the manner in which it has managed its relations with its Western partners and to its historic alliances with Russia and even China. This is vitally important, given that the EU's concern with the BRICS, as mentioned above, is mainly focused on countries such as Russia and China. South Africa has strong relations with Russia, which can be traced back to the Soviet Union's support for the African National Congress (ANC) during Apartheid. In 2006, President Vladimir Putin became the first Russian head of state to visit southern Africa, an event which also led to the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Partnership between the two states (Arkhangelskaya & Shubin 2013). In 2013, South Africa and Russia also established their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. South Africa has similar historic ties with China, with the Chinese also providing some support to the South African Communist Party (SACP) during the Apartheid era. In 2001, relations between China and South Africa were solidified by the signing of the Pretoria Declaration; in 2004, these ties were elevated to the level of a strategic partnership (Alden & Wu 2014).

That South Africa has been able to manage its long-standing relations with Russia and China, while also maintaining its relations with Western partners such as the United States (US) and the EU would enhance its legitimacy as a mediator that can balance the interests and concerns of both the EU and the BRICS. The trust that has been established through its strong relations with a wide range of partners could lend credence to its role as a broker. South Africa showcased its role as a mediator through its involvement in the African peace mission that was sent to Ukraine on 16 June 2023 (Singh & Reva 23 June 2023). It should be noted that this mission succeeded in tabling a proposal to both Kyiv and Moscow, which is something few other international actors had been able to achieve. Of all the BRICS members, South Africa is perhaps best positioned to mediate in the conflict, given the non-aligned stance it pursues in its foreign policy as well as its considerable experience in mediation stemming from Apartheid. From the EU's perspective, if the bloc wants to engage with the BRICS in the hopes of gradually influencing the grouping to promote certain values or fields of cooperation, then South Africa would be a prime partner candidate, given the country's political system and long-standing relations with the EU.

It is important to note however, that for South Africa to play a 'brokering' role, the EU has first to accept South Africa in that role. According to Naidu (2023), South Africa may currently be in a better position to play the role than other African BRICS states, such as Egypt and Ethiopia, given that the former is dealing with the spill-over impact of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the latter with issues in Tigray and Somalia. However, South Africa may not be viewed very positively by EU states at present, given its actions at the ICJ. While the EU itself has taken no stance on South Africa's case, arguing that they would not comment on the case (Jones 12 January 2024); Germany has not supported South Africa, stating instead that Israel's actions do not constitute genocide (Talmon 15 January 2024). In fact, Germany has announced that it would intervene in the case brought by South Africa on Israel's behalf as a third party (Schultan 19 January 2024). Therefore, South Africa's ongoing case against Israel at the ICJ presents a potential impediment to its envisioned role as a mediator between the EU and the BRICS. This is particularly evident in the divergence between some of its opinions and those of key EU member states, most

notably Germany. However, the legal dispute also serves as a testament to South Africa's unwavering commitment to international law, underscoring its earnest dedication to upholding the principles and obligations to which it is bound.

Recommendations: areas of converging interests

Regardless of whether the EU deems the BRICS to be highly significant or an institution without substance, the BRICS' recent expansion demonstrates that the grouping is here to stay.

Regardless of whether the EU deems the BRICS to be highly significant or an institution without substance, the BRICS' recent expansion demonstrates that the grouping is here to stay. Of the five new BRICS members, four—Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—are located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The MENA region is a geopolitical hotspot, with *inter alia* tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Israel-Gaza conflict. In the case of the former, Türkiye and Greece disagree on the islands and their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) (Dalay 28 January 2021). Additionally, the recent discovery of gas resources in the Mediterranean region and the subsequent formation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF)—which includes Egypt, France, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine but excludes Türkiye—has added to Turkish fears of being sidelined in the region. What is becoming evident is that the BRICS is going to have an increasing stake in these issues. For example, Egypt has a direct stake given that it is part of the EMGF and has signed an EEZ agreement with Greece. Russia retains vested ties in the region, given its relations with Türkiye; Russia has, for example, built Türkiye's first nuclear power plant (Reuters 27 April 2023). Meanwhile, Iran also has a stake in the MENA region, where it sponsors Hezbollah militants in southern Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen (Beaumont 7 January 2024). Since November 2023, there have been over 20 attacks initiated by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels targeting ships in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital maritime route connecting Asia and Europe (Jack 31 December 2023).

While the BRICS have yet to collectively release any policy and security documents relating to the Eastern Mediterranean, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it may, at some stage, influence policy in the region, especially since it regularly refers to Palestine and Syria in its declarations.

While the BRICS have yet to collectively release any policy and security documents relating to the Eastern Mediterranean, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it may, at some stage, influence policy in the region, especially since it regularly refers to Palestine and Syria in its declarations. If this is the case, it is vitally important for the EU to take this into consideration. Notably, that the EU already recognizes the importance of the region is evident from the introduction of its new and innovative *Agenda for the Mediterranean* in 2021 (European Commission 2021). To build on this, it is crucial that the EU engage with the BRICS proactively and strategically, especially since the expanded BRICS now includes countries from the MENA region, which is geographically close to Europe. Cooperation does not need to be centred around shared values, but should rather be focused on shared interests. The above signifies one area of shared interest between the EU and the BRICS. Several other areas in which cooperation could be pursued are discussed below.

- **Cooperation between the EU and the BRICS needs to begin with the identification of areas of shared interests (not necessarily values).** The BRICS nations and the EU share common challenges such as sustainable development, migration, environmental conservation, and climate change, and these are areas in which interests may converge. Although cooperation in such areas is often likened to 'soft cooperation', it could be thought of instead as 'smart cooperation', since it would revolve around collaborating in areas that are of paramount importance to both groupings and designed to yield tangible results for both parties.

- **To address such areas of interest, the BRICS and the EU need to engage in multilateral discussions along with other important actors such as governments from the MENA region and the rest of Africa.** Such dialogues could facilitate the identification of a collective strategic plan and the advancement of collaborative initiatives. To foster this collaborative effort, it is imperative that the EU demonstrates a commitment to identifying strategies that effectively alleviate the adverse consequences associated with European Union policies.
- **The EU could consider placing greater emphasis on engaging with BRICS.** Given the current ambiguity in the EU's perspective on the BRICS, adopting a more defined stance could prove beneficial, potentially paving the way for the release of a comprehensive strategy on BRICS akin to the bloc's Indo-Pacific strategy.
- **Engagement is how the EU can potentially influence the development of international norms, foster a cooperative and peaceful global order, and safeguard its interests.** More specifically, the EU could endorse the leadership of specific BRICS and African nations in domains that are significant for European interests. For example, the EU could support Brazil's endeavour, in collaboration with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Indonesia, to safeguard rainforests on a global scale and establish shared criteria for quantifying carbon emissions (Procopio, 2023). On a practical level, another potential avenue for collective collaboration could centre on the provision of skills training, both technical and governmental, in the field of renewable energy and related technologies. The trilateral conversation between the EU, the SA and BRICs could facilitate the development and funding of significant regional projects, including energy transmission lines and railway infrastructure.
- **The EU could further enhance its commitment to addressing environmental concerns, such as greenhouse gas emissions, by fostering collaboration with key partners including South Africa.** Given South Africa's rich natural resources and renewable energy potential, the collaboration could extend beyond the traditional fossil fuel value chains. Both entities could work together to explore and promote cleaner alternatives, such as renewable energy sources and innovative technologies. Moreover, the EU and South Africa could find common ground in advancing specific value chains, such as the production and distribution of biofuels. This cooperation could involve sharing expertise, technological know-how, and research findings. Such collaboration would not only address environmental concerns, it would also contribute to the BRICS nations' broader agenda of sustainable development, which could become a model for other BRICS nations.

Ultimately, the EU needs to recognize the pressing need to engage proactively and strategically with the BRICS, particularly since the BRICS' expansion to include countries from the MENA region, which is geographically close to Europe. The focus is not solely on shared values, but also on identifying and nurturing shared interests.

Concluding remarks

Endorsing the collective endeavours discussed above would convey the EU's willingness to engage in cooperation with the BRICS, and by extension with countries in the Global South. This would enable the EU to convey a significant message, recognizing the increasing significance of the BRICS nations and Africa in global decision-making processes, as well as their crucial involvement in energy and climate dynamics. Increased collaboration among actors in the Global South, exemplified by the growth of the BRICS (despite the anticipated presence of numerous differences within the group), has the potential to increase the groupings' involvement in each other's energy sectors. This

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encompasses not only the energy sources that European politicians are keen to minimize, such as fossil fuels, but also the sectors the EU and its member states are seeking to advance, such as mineral value chains. It is imperative for the EU to actively engage in discussions to promote multilateralism between the Global North and Global South. This approach is necessary to offset potential risks associated with increased cohesion among countries in the Global South, and to maintain their relevance amidst the changing dynamics of global energy and climate governance. The BRICS should carefully contemplate this proposition as it aligns with its commitment to uphold the principle of 'more inclusive governance.'

Ultimately, the EU needs to recognize the pressing need to engage proactively and strategically with the BRICS, particularly since the BRICS' expansion to include countries from the MENA region, which is geographically close to Europe. The focus is not solely on shared values, but also on identifying and nurturing shared interests. The EU and the BRICS share common challenges—sustainable development, environmental conservation, and the urgent battle against climate change—creating converging points of interest. By prioritizing engagement, the EU could seize an opportunity to influence global norms and foster a cooperative global order while safeguarding its own interests. South Africa could emerge as a pivotal player, given its robust relationships with the majority of EU member states, its ties within BRICS, and its historical expertise in mediation. In addition, South Africa's alignment with EU values positions it as a potential 'broker' between the EU and BRICS, in which position it could advocate for norms which resonate with both entities and leverage its diplomatic prowess for mutual benefit.

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