

BRICS+ AND SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION CHALLENGED BY THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

DOI: [10.58867/SVVR2903](https://doi.org/10.58867/SVVR2903)

Can BRICS+ play a transformative role in South-South cooperation, particularly in the field of climate change? Despite its membership heterogeneity, the BRICS+ grouping has become a central actor in the field of international development cooperation in an attempt both to craft a symbolic regime that challenges norms generated within a Western liberal global order and to implement economic decisions that need to respond to the climate emergency within a rejuvenated development agenda. Written from a Brazilian perspective, this paper explores key opportunities and contradictions in this endeavour, considering national assets and multilateral responses to the climate emergency within BRICS+.

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Keywords: BRICS+, South-South Cooperation,
International Development, The Climate Emergency, Brazil.



TPQ

Winter 2023/24
BRICS Special Issue

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Since the first BRIC summit held in Yekaterinburg in 2009, the group initially integrated by Brazil, Russia, India, and China has welcomed South Africa in 2010, then Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in 2023. Argentina's new president formally announced that Buenos Aires would not join the BRICS (now the BRICS+) grouping in December 2023. The list of countries interested in joining the group is long, which shows that BRICS+ offers several strategic assets to the geopolitical South; however, the expansion process also has political implications in the group's institutionalization dynamics. Since its inception, the group has discussed ways and means toward a less Western-centric global order, and decided to set up innovative economic institutions, such as the Business Council, the Think Tank Council, the BRICS Economy and Trade Ministers Conference, and mainly the New Development Bank.

In less than twenty years of existence, the BRICS+ has already had a considerable impact on issues related to South-South Cooperation (SSC), hierarchy, and status in international politics.¹ That is the ideational dimension of BRICS+ as a coalition of powers in international relations. However, its foundation and development have also contributed to improving a material, strategic, and geopolitical vision of power among its member states, covering a wide span of economic, financial, technological, scientific and political dimensions, for instance, in matters of intra-group trade and financial transactions, food exchange, infrastructure investment, and fossil fuel exports.² In the case of Brazil, research groups and scholarly networks have been created to respond to the needs of understanding this changing global reality, such as the BRICS Policy Center in 2011 and the Brazilian Network of China Studies in 2017. Brazil's foreign policy considers BRICS+ one of the country's key priorities in promoting national trade, investment, and technological interests, but also in fostering a geopolitical vision to what Brasilia qualifies as critical changes in global governance, mainly regarding the United Nations security and development agendas.

In a changing global order, China stands out from within the BRICS+ with extraordinary clarity: a confirmed economic power, it is a strategic, economic, military, and cultural power rivaling the United States. China has a permanent seat with the right of veto at the UN Security Council and its economy still benefits from the recognition of the status of a developing country within the WTO. Beijing has played a central role in the group's recent expansion, bringing in countries where Chinese investments prosper in strategic sectors: Saudi Arabia, for instance, was the first destination of Chinese foreign investment in 2022.³ BRICS+ needs

1) N. Duggan, B. Hooijmaaijers, M. Rewizorski and E. Arapova, "The BRICS, Global Governance, and Challenges for South-South Cooperation in a Post-Western World," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2022): p. 469-480; Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

2) Michael Kahn, "A cooperação dos BRICS na ciência, tecnologia e inovação: retórica e realidades," *Contexto Internacional*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015): p. 185-213; Siphamandla Zondi (ed.), *The Political Economy of Intra-BRICS Cooperation: Challenges and Prospects* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan & Springer Nature, 2022).

3) CEBC (Conselho Empresarial Brasil-China / Business Council Brazil-China), *Chinese Investment in Brazil 2022*,

China to secure its positioning in the chessboard of international politics; I argue, however, that China also needs BRICS+ for diplomatic reasons associated with the promotion of multilateral organizations and the foundation of institutions in a post-Western global order. The expansion of the group illustrates that argument.

We should not forget that there are ambiguities in the Chinese position regarding the UN Security Council reform, since India and Japan are two of the countries requesting access on this condition. India is a crucial BRICS+ member, but it also has strategic dialogues with Western powers, including the USA, Japan, and Australia. In the area of development cooperation, Beijing seeks to legitimize its trajectory at the multilateral level, with significant support from the G-77 countries. It also proposes institutional changes - as in the case of the latest reforms implemented at the World Bank and the IMF. Votes coming from developing countries matter in the multilateral setting.

Therefore, the context is complex. China is influential within the BRICS+, but so are Russia and India, and to a much lesser extent, Saudi Arabia and Brazil. Furthermore, Western powers sometimes have difficulties understanding the international system's diversity and multipolar nature. Still, they also accept the full integration of new powers as part and parcel of globalization and regionalization processes. In general, the West lacks the skills (and perhaps the will) to respond intelligently and without arrogance to the requests coming from the global and regional powers of the South in terms of recognition, status and representation in the up-to-now failed reform attempts of UN multilateral institutions. In other words, most Western leaders tend not to acknowledge that the international system needs to take onboard visions and norms coming from Asian, African and Latin American powers. Instead, based on a past of glory (and domination), Western diplomacy often deploys instruments of humiliation instead of building a new global order together with other risen and rising powers.⁴

South-South Cooperation as a Key Dimension of the Multipolar Order

South-South Cooperation (SSC) is both a material and a symbolic form of contestation coming from non-Western actors to norms and practices that have been created and diffused by the Geopolitical North.⁵ However, Southern countries in general, and the BRICS+ in particular, do not only build their strategies as a response to prior action by

Technology and Energy Transition (2023). Research Director: Tulio Carielo, available in Portuguese and English at <https://www.cebc.org.br/2023/08/29/numero-de-projetos-chineses-no-brasil-bateu-recorde-em-2022/>

4) Shaun Breslin, *China Risen? Studying Chinese Global Power* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

5) North and South are geopolitical ideal types. The geopolitical North refers to central and Western powers (USA, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) that tend to act on common grounds in major security and development agendas. They build consensus around some key formal and informal institutions, such as the G-7, IMF, NATO, OECD or the World Bank. The geopolitical South encompasses developing countries that have been marginalized from international governance decision-making roles, given their middle or low position in global hierarchies of power. Such countries may seek recognition, to build Southern coalitions (BRICS' New Development Bank, IBSA, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), and challenge Northern world-visions (on human rights, climate change, development cooperation, the origins of international inequality etc.).

the North; they also create international norms and generate economic development programs in other developing countries. The BRICS+ grouping carries considerable weight and relevance in the global political economy. In the development cooperation field, they are reluctant to embrace established norms, showing eagerness to propose and diffuse norms, such as non-intervention, redistributive justice, and a socially inclusive development model. For instance, they choose non-conditionality and non-intervention in domestic affairs as norms that cut across official SSC narratives while endorsing “win-win” partnerships, horizontality, and shared commonalities.⁶

Since colonial times, Northern countries have exported (and in many cases imposed) political, economic, social, and cultural models in the guise of promises of modernisation and development; however, pledges of progress have in fact entailed the maintenance of asymmetric relations, often based on dominance, humiliation, and exploitation.⁷ The BRICS+ support development cooperation criteria differ from those set up by the OECD-DAC countries, and they associate their practice with a postcolonial history rooted in autonomy, self-reliance, and political contestation. By refusing the political conditionality, the BRICS+ group recognizes that each sovereign nation has the right to decide which future social models, development patterns, and public policies it will adopt to achieve its goals. For instance, the Chinese government states that “when providing foreign assistance, China adheres to the principles of not imposing any political conditions, not interfering in the internal affairs of the recipient countries, and fully respecting their right to choose their own paths and models of development independently. The basic principles China upholds in providing foreign assistance are mutual respect, equality, keeping promises, mutual benefits, and win-win”.⁸ Likewise, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme states that, “South-South Cooperation is a partnership born out of a shared sense of solidarity and is entirely voluntary and free of conditionalities”.⁹ The Brazilian Cooperation Agency also claims that Brazil’s cooperation “is demand-driven, and free of impositions or conditionalities.”^{10,11}

What is also interesting is how the UN agencies and funds may perceive the BRICS+ and the rise of countries of the Geopolitical South at the beginning of the 21st century

6) Rubens de S. Duarte, *The Politics behind Aid and Cooperation Norms: Critical Reflections on the Normative Role of Brazil and the United Kingdom* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019).

7) Ayşe Zarakol, “What Made the Modern World Hang Together: Socialisation or Stigmatisation?” *International Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2014): p. 311-32; Bertrand Badie, *Le temps des Humiliés: Pathologie des Relations Internationales* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014).

8) *The People’s Republic of China, China’s Foreign Aid* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, July 2014), p. 1.

9) Available at <https://www.itecgoi.in/about.php>, accessed on 10 January 2019.

10) Agência Brasileira de Cooperação (ABC), *Manual of South-South Technical Cooperation Management* (Brasília: Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2017), <http://www.abc.gov.br/api/publicacaoarquivo/38>, p. 16.

11) Rubens de S. Duarte and Carlos R. S. Milani, “Southern States in International Development Cooperation: From Contestation to Norm Conception,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2021): p. 506-529.

as an opportunity to reaffirm their relevance in international relations. The arrival of new development cooperation players not only increases the number of possibilities of partnerships for the least developed countries (LDCs), it also results in new institutional arrangements and more legitimacy for UN agencies in a context of crisis of multilateral organizations. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) decided to incorporate norms originating in the South.¹² Since their creation, FAO and UNDP have been key players in delivering multilateral cooperation worldwide, even though Northern countries may consider them relatively unimportant institutions. Mainly via trilateral cooperation, the UNDP and FAO started either implementing or financing social policy programs originating in Southern countries. It is the case of the Food Purchase Programme for Africa, Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, Ardahan-Kars-Artvin Development Project, School Feeding Programmes, and China-UNDP Trilateral Cooperation on Renewable Energy with Zambia and Ghana.¹³

The Climate Emergency as a Major Challenge for BRICS+

Will the BRICS+ be able to take a step further in strategic, development, and diplomatic cooperation around cardinal issue areas, including the climate emergency and its corollary, the need for implementing energy transition frameworks and environmentally sustainable public policies? Anthropogenic climate change is here defined as an interconnected and interdependent set of natural, social, economic, and political problems that relate to unprecedented severity, scale, and complexity.¹⁴ The accelerated loss of biodiversity, increasing deforestation rates, rising emissions of CO₂ associated with the continuous development of the fossil economy, and the climate emergency are fundamental components of the Anthropocene, which have produced intense public debates about the responsibility of states, corporations and lifestyles of the wealthiest nations, groups and individuals.

At the same time, the younger generations and people living in the least developed countries, particularly small island developing nations, and poorer communities living in coastal areas, are more vulnerable and have less causal responsibility. There are historical and geographical differences in terms of causal responsibilities. Some scholars and political actors refer to humankind as the primary bearer of a global responsibility. Still, I argue that the Anthropocene must be interpreted from the intra- and inter-generational climate justice perspective, analyzing the contradictions between responsibility for GHG

12) Carolina Milhorange and Folashade S. Kohndou, "South-South Cooperation and Chance in International Organizations," *Global Governance*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2017): p. 461-81.

13) Rubens de S. Duarte and Carlos R. S. Milani, (2021).

14) Dominique Bourg, "Anthropocène, Questions d'Interprétation," in R. Beau and C. Larrère (Eds.), *Penser l'Anthropocène* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2014): p. 63-76; E. A. Page, "Distributing the Burdens of Climate Change," *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2008): p. 556-575.

emissions and the right to a socially just and environmentally sound development.

A sense of emergency clearly marks the complexity of the climate crisis due to the acceleration of changes. Acknowledging the Anthropocene and the climate emergency implies coordinating different public policy sectors in space and time. The effects of today's policy actions have extended lead times when it comes to climate stability: what is done today can have a limited impact on climate stability over the next fifty years, but our inaction today may have considerable costs in the coming twenty or thirty years. Situated between environmental and economic, energy, and security debates, but also involving public health issues, the climate emergency requires responses from different institutions at the national (ministries and secretariats) and at the multilateral levels (United Nations Environment Program, UN Development Program, World Health Organization, etc.). The latest debates in Brazil about Petrobras' request to drill for oil at the mouth of the Amazon River, an area of high risk and socioenvironmental vulnerability, showcases this coordination challenge at the national level, which may cause a serious rift within the Lula administration. Internationally, the BRICS+ group must deal with this challenge.

In fact, many BRICS+ countries are among the world's major emitters in absolute terms, thus needing to address the climate emergency for both international and national reasons. China (1st), India (3rd), Russia (4th), Brazil (5th), Iran (8th), and Saudi Arabia (9th) are among the top-10 major emitters in absolute terms. The United Arab Emirates (7th) and Saudi Arabia (10th) are among the top-10 major per capita emitters.¹⁵

Moreover, China's accelerated growth and double participation in the world's economy as a significant demander of commodities and a large producer of manufactured products have resulted in substantial changes on its bilateral trade with many BRICS+ countries since the beginning of the 2000s.¹⁶ In the case of Brazil, such trade relations have interacted with a series of domestic variables, wherein the development of agribusiness and mining sectors fostered growing deforestation rates and affected the country's land-use and GHG emissions. Considering China's investments, it is important to understand their potential impact on the further development of renewable energies and the national market of electric vehicles and batteries in Brazil and South America. Due to its economy's scale and geopolitical projection, China's investments and technological drivers have environmental and climate-related consequences for the future of socially and environmentally sustainable development programs. Will the BRICS+ group integrate the complex effects of climate change and foster cooperation to speed up the transition to a low-carbon economy? Will they commit to a serious energy transition

15) See at <https://ourworldindata.org/greenhouse-gas-emissions>

16) Oscar Ugarteche and C. De Leon, "China and the Change of the Energy Matrix in Latin America: a Global Political Economy Approach," *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2022): p. 442-459.

programme and to the mitigation of GHG emissions fairly and equitably, considering the singularities of each national context, as well as the pressing needs of planetary severe action? Will BRICS+ show solidarity towards southern countries facing short-term adaptation difficulties, such as the least-developed states, small islands, and countries with threatened coastal zones? These are vital questions that scholars and policy analysts should rigorously monitor in the coming months and years.