

*International Conference on Future World Order: New Parameters
Towards a Multilateral World: BRICS and SCO Enlargements
Prospects Towards an Alternative Discourse on Multilateralism in the Middle East*

By

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Moscow, 29-30 November 2023

Multilateralism is frequently characterized as a form of collaboration across several sovereign States, comprising distinct qualitative elements or principles that establish the essence of the accord or partnership. This includes the parties involved having independent interests, a commitment to fostering reciprocity, and a dispute resolution process intended to enforce a certain behavioral pattern. In actuality, multilateralism is more than just a method or a matter of how many parties participate. Further, it emphasized that the maintenance of a consistent set of norms and values is necessary to build a regime of shared political objectives. Its operations are governed by principles that have been collectively defined to ensure sustained and fruitful cooperation. According to Robert Keohane, Multilateralism is the process of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more governments, either through institutions or ad hoc agreements.³

Although multilateralism has an extended history, it is mostly linked to the post-World War II period, when the United States was the primary proponent of a growing number of multilateral agreements. The multilateral system that was established during World War II is predicated on common "principles of conduct," "indivisibility," and expectations of "diffuse reciprocity" and is intended to promote cooperation among states. Through military intervention and soft power, the US served as a benevolent hegemon, promoting Western universalism and the multilateral system throughout a significant portion of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Multilateralism in the Post-Cold War World Order

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³ Keohane, Robert O. (1990): "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research". In: International Journal 45(4), 731.

Significant opportunities for multilateral collaboration emerged in the post-Cold War era. With incredible success, nations managed and reduced genuine global shared challenges through multilateral architecture. A decade or so after the conclusion of the Cold War saw the rise of a more unified international order, which was a testament to the benefits of multilateralism. The World Trade Organization was founded in 1995 and China joined in 2001, the UN Security Council played a crucial role in resolving conflicts in the Balkan region, including the Bosnian war of 1992–1995 and the Kosovo conflict of 1998–1999, and the World Health Organization handled the 2003 SARS pandemic.⁴

A persistent paradigm shift in the essence of multilateralism has been evident since the turn of the twenty-first century, as several non-Western countries have emerged as leaders in creating several multilateral institutions to counterbalance their own geopolitical dynamics vis-à-vis the West. Since the late 1990s, the People's Republic of China has participated more actively in regional and international multilateral security practices and has even assumed the lead in several of them. Therefore, multilateralism is not only ingrained in China's new "security concept," but it is also a tried-and-true method by which China can bolster its security, restrain US influence, and allay the fears of its smaller neighbors. China has every right to pursue this course of action, but how effectively it manages the tense relationship between China and the United States as well as China's other outstanding bilateral concerns will determine the final result and its effects on overall security.⁵ SCO and BRICS may be the most noteworthy instances of such multilateral arrangements. Additionally, it was seen that mixed multilateral groupings were being formed to address non-traditional security challenges, accommodating both non-Western and Western power brokers with comparable interests. The G20 is the most influential global forum in this sense.

The paper intends to define how the creation of SCO and BRICS by non-western nations has altered the conventional discourse of multilateralism in the realm of continuous geopolitical instability and paved an alternative way toward cooperation under anarchy.

⁴ Dossani, Rafiq (2022), *Can Multilateralism Survive in an Age of Great Power Rivalry?*, Center for Asia Pacific Policy, RAND Corporation.

⁵ Gill, Bates (2004), *China's new security multilateralism and its implications for the Asia-Pacific region*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Year Book 2004.

Emergence of BRICS: Re-approaching Multilateralism

The group of five significant developing economies is known by its acronym, BRICS, and they are South Africa, India, China, Brazil, and Russia. Each member of BRICS is a major player with enormous influence, which is what gives the group its immense strength. Because of their strong positions, both locally and globally, the BRICS nations were given the designation of "emerging power alliances." collectively, the BRICS nations represent the world's leading rising economies, which collectively account for 41% of the global population. The association's primary goal is to foster the principles of equality, non-interference, and mutual benefit. The BRICS have chosen to act as an international consortium with the ability to influence and lead the global system from its inception. Strengthening and transforming the multilateral system was the primary agenda of BRICS. They highlighted the common ideals of democracy, human rights, freedom, the rule of law, and fairness in addition to a multipolar international order that is just, inclusive, equal, and representative.⁶ They also emphasized the significance of territorial integrity, reciprocal respect for interests, and sovereign equality of all states. Maintaining its uniqueness from other international organizations and hegemonic powers is a crucial aim in addition to these other goals.⁷

First and foremost, to make global institutions more inclusive and egalitarian, the BRICS have been pressing for reforms. The members of the BRICS alliance have always opposed the application of unilateral sanctions by any entity, particularly those from the West. Such actions can have severe consequences for emerging, marginalized, and smaller economies. The imposition of sanctions on significant players in the energy and commodities markets typically results in an increase in the global prices of essential commodities.⁸ This, in turn, causes many economies in the Global South to struggle to meet their basic needs as a result of having to purchase these commodities at higher prices from overseas markets, especially when their foreign exchange reserves are running low.

⁶ Cooper, A.F. 2016. BRICS: A short introduction. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Xing, L., ed. 2014. The BRICS and beyond: the international political economy of the emergence of a new world order. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

⁸ Beeson, M., and J. Zeng. 2018. The BRICS and global governance: China's contradictory role. *Third World Quarterly* 39 (10): 1962–1978. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1438186>.

The BRICS countries intend to promote local currency trade among their constituent states. It will take time for a BRICS unified currency to be backed by gold to become a thing of the past. However, bilateral exchange in local currencies can be a significant step toward easing the dominance of some Western currencies in international commerce.⁹ This issue has attracted increased attention due to a pattern that has been evident for some time: when Western blocs implement unilateral sanctions, the foreign exchange reserves of the targeted nations are frozen. Building up foreign exchange reserves is a long-term process that requires years or even decades, but it ensures that a country's ability to do international business is supported in hard times.

BRICS Expansion: Implication of Revived Multilateralism in Middle East

President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa declared at the BRICS Summit 2023 that Argentina, Ethiopia, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates will join the BRICS. It put a halt to a variety of conjectures regarding BRICS expansion. With the new members joining, the BRICS as of right now would account for 29% of the global GDP by the end of 2023; their combined population would be approximately 46% of the world's population; their share of oil production would now be 43% of the world's total; and their share of merchandise exports would be 25% of the world's total. No one can afford to ignore these numbers.¹⁰

During the BRICS summit in South Africa, 67 countries from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were asked to participate in BRICS-plus discussions and BRICS-Africa outreach. The majority view the BRICS and G20, which India is hosting as alternatives and the most just mechanisms for enacting changes in international multilateral institutions, establishing fair and equal opportunities for all, consolidating markets in Asia and Africa, and shifting the focus of international transactions from fiat currencies to local currencies.¹¹ And there are already a lot of

⁹ Duggan, N., J.C. LadinesAzalia, and M. Rewizorski. 2021. The structural power of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in multilateral development finance: A case study of the new development bank. *International Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211048297>.

¹⁰ Xing, L., ed. 2014. *The BRICS and beyond: the international political economy of the emergence of a new world order*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

¹¹ Xi, J. 2017. Stronger BRICS partnership for a brighter future. Remarks at the Plenary Session of the BRICS Xiamen Summit. Xiamen, 4 September, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1489862.shtml.

people interested in joining BRICS. Concurrently, there is a renewed upsurge in demonstrations, civil disobedience, and indignation against what many African nations view as the unrelenting meddling in their domestic affairs by their former European rulers.¹²

Regional and global circumstances combine to drive BRICS's expansion into the Middle East. The process of expansion affects both local and global environments; it is not only a passive presence. Rather, it is active and dynamic. To foster bilateral and multilateral trade agreements between the four new signatories—Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—BRICS has made its way into the Middle East with strong economic potential for the area. Known for their stability and importance in the area, these four nations greatly influence its dynamics. Due to the grouping's greater geoeconomic focus, the BRICS expansion into the Middle East will support cooperative multilateralism, enhance the multi-alignment option for regional nations, and promote conflict resolution.¹³

Unique geopolitical goals motivate Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, these goals are to steer their economies away from resource reliance; for Egypt, they are to guide their economies away from economic stagnation; and for Iran, they are to lead their economies toward economic isolation. The aspiration of these nations to compete globally and become partners instead of dependents is another motivating factor. Membership in the BRICS is unlikely to focus on competing interests at the regional level and is more likely to encourage coordination of economic objectives at the global level since it does not need in-group political pledges or solidarity.¹⁴

The post-pandemic and post-Ukrainian war global economic dynamics have caused disruptions in the global food supply chains for import-dependent nations such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have persuaded them to join the emerging production and manufacturing

¹² Duggan, N., J.C. LadinesAzalia, and M. Rewizorski. 2021. The structural power of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in multilateral development finance: A case study of the new development bank. *International Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211048297>.

¹³ Xi, J. 2017. Stronger BRICS partnership for a brighter future. Remarks at the Plenary Session of the BRICS Xiamen Summit. Xiamen, 4 September, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1489862.shtml.

¹⁴ Dizikes, Peter (2023), The BRICS expansion and the global balance of power, MIT News, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

blocs like 12U2. The BRICS membership is an extension of this policy. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries firmly believe that nations such as India have enormous potential to be reliable suppliers in the global supply chain.¹⁵ China, on the other hand, can assist Middle Eastern countries technologically; Saudi Arabia's contemplation of developing nuclear facilities with Chinese assistance is proof of this. Additionally, the biggest consumers of oil from Riyadh are China and India.

It is crucial to emphasize that oil-producing nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Russia, as well as their partnerships with developing Asian nations like China and India, point to the formation of an economic bloc with the capital, human resources, technology, and markets necessary to potentially lift the global south out of poverty and inequality.¹⁶

In addition to upending dollar hegemony and strengthening Europe's exchange system, smaller economies in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa may profit from this new economic mechanism. These locations have the capacity to become into hubs for sustainable development and innovative economic ventures. Political stability in areas of extreme conflict, crises, and suffering might benefit from these new economic activities under an alternative trading system, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, the new framework may make it possible to conduct business in local currencies, which would put the trade and exchange system in the West in jeopardy. De-dollarization is said to have an impact on the dominance of the United States and Europe in the world market for energy supplies.¹⁷

To show the world that there is room for several inclusive strategies and alternative forms of global governance that have the potential to unite regions and create connectivity links to enhance peace and prosperity in the world, the BRICS organization is expanding to the Middle East, but doing so

¹⁵ Tugendhat, Henry & Verjee, Aly (2023), What BRICS Expansion Means for the Bloc's Founding Members, United States Institute for Peace.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/what-brics-expansion-means-blocs-founding-members>

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ The Hindu Bureau (2023), Explaining the BRICS expansion, The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/infographics-explaining-the-brics-expansion/article67248395.ece>

will require engaging with actors and powers that may not want to commit to a revision of the current global system. Instead, the organization hopes to strengthen new alliances and multilateralism.¹⁸

It is expected that the Middle East's normalization process would quicken due to BRICS development. This is because the four major regional powers—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran—have the capacity to work together to battle terrorism, extremism, and instability as well as control the region's refugee issue. There is a chance to encourage investors who are risk apprehensive and create an atmosphere that is favorable to investments and delicate geopolitical concerns. Large firms, well-known technological companies, and investors would be drawn to the Middle East's unexplored markets due to their significant growth potential in this favorable atmosphere.¹⁹ Rejecting revisionist narratives, opposing extremism, and containing extremist ideologies would all be necessary for the acceleration of economic activity. Most importantly, this might promote collaboration, a sense of security, and dependency.

SCO: Ushering a New Era of Multilateralism

A new kind of international organization was founded on the Eurasian continent when the chiefs of state of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan met in Shanghai and signed the statement establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The establishment of the SCO, a turning point in 21st-century international relations, has marked the beginning of a new chapter in regional and global governance as well as a new age of interstate ties and regional cooperation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is praised as “an important and constructive force in the Eurasian region and international affairs” as it advances from its founding on June 15, 2001, to 2021.²⁰ Since the SCO still follows current trends, addresses pressing regional issues, and advances member nations' interests in regional government, its foundation was

¹⁸ Tugendhat, Henry & Verjee, Aly (2023), What BRICS Expansion Means for the Bloc's Founding Members, United States Institute for Peace.

¹⁹ The Hindu Bureau (2023), Explaining the BRICS expansion, The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/infographics-explaining-the-brics-expansion/article67248395.ece>

²⁰ Aris, S. 2009. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the three evils'. A regional response to non-traditional security challenges or an anti-western bloc?'. *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (3): 457–482.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130902753309>.

prescient and right. SCO has established a model for constructing state-to-state interactions characterized by reciprocity, equity, justice, and win-win situations while gaining invaluable experience for creating a community with a shared destiny for all people.

The evolution of SCO may be interpreted in terms of the phases before and after the year of its membership expansion. The "Shanghai Spirit," which included "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and pursuit of common development," was first presented during the establishing period, which ran from 2001 to 2004. To provide rules and a legal framework, the member nations of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism accepted an outline for global commerce as well as a charter. By 2004, two permanent establishments had been made: a regional antiterrorist organization in Tashkent and a secretariat located in Beijing. The 2004–2017 SCO growth period was characterized by internal building and external collaboration.²¹

The organization places a high priority on collaboration to preserve regional stability, which is a necessary prerequisite for the socioeconomic development of its member nations. The SCO idea never invents a fictitious opponent as it is predicated on cooperative security, shared security, and universal security. Central Asian nations have not been "Middle Easternized" because they have effectively countered non-traditional security challenges and established a secure environment that promotes growth and a peaceful way of life for citizens. All of the member nations' economies have been doing well overall, with GDP and per capita GDP growth above the global average over the same period, and trade facilitation having improved. Without the SCO's members' effective security cooperation, this would not be conceivable.²²

Mutual gain from multilateral methods encourages collaboration, and institutional frameworks for the economy, commerce, and investment at the regional level. The combined GDP of all SCO members is around \$20 trillion, which is more than 13 times greater than it was at the organization's

²¹ Kirton, John & Larionova, Marina (2022), 'Contagious convergent cumulative cooperation: the dynamic development of the G20, BRICS and SCO', *International Politics*.

²² Aris, S. 2009. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the three evils'. A regional response to non-traditional security challenges or an anti-western bloc?'. *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (3): 457–482.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130902753309>.

founding. At US\$6.6 trillion, the SCO's total international commerce is more than 100 times greater than it was 20 years ago. An important experience for South-South cooperation among developing nations comes from the SCO Interbank Association and a Council of Businessmen, a push for trade growth through investment, resources for loans to meet financial constraints, and demonstration projects.

The Chinese Assertiveness in SCO

The majority of commentators concur that China is a key player in the SCO process and that this regional organization is mostly a Chinese effort. According to some observers, China made an effort to infiltrate and oversee this area through a multilateral strategy. China is implementing the "Beijing Consensus" in Central Asia through the SCO. The SCO has progressively evolved into the primary vehicle or framework for Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, given that political principles and foreign policy constitute one of China's three main sources of soft power. Russia is a member of the group in addition to the Central Asian nations, which helps to considerably lessen the image of China as a danger in the region. Additionally, China may work closely with the SCO to tackle terrorism, extremism, separatism, and other cross-border criminal groups within a strong framework. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which supports Xinjiang's independence, is the main focus of China's anti-terrorism effort.²³

Unlike Russia, which had Central Asia for a long time as a part of Tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union for almost 200 years, China uses the SCO as a means of expanding its influence in its immediate region, where it lacks a strong historical and cultural base. China was therefore primarily focused on strengthening ties with the current members of the organization, especially the Central Asian republics, and was not typically interested in extending invitations to new members to join. Beijing was just as interested in the growth of commercial relations as it was in the security component. China has high expectations for the SCO's capacity to coordinate global

²³ Gao, F. 2010. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China's New Diplomacy. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, Discussion Papers in Diplomacy, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20100700_The%20Shanghai%20Cooperation%20Organization%20and%20China%27s%20New%20Diplomacy.pdf.

economic cooperation.²⁴ Beijing intended to exploit the SCO as a means of exporting cash, labor, and goods to the surrounding nations. China proposed many ideas to achieve this goal, ranging from the creation of the SCO Development Bank to the adoption of a free trade zone.

The SCO Expansion: A New Centre of Attraction for the Middle East?

The Middle East has been drawn to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in recent years, with numerous nations vying for membership. Its achievements bear witness to the redrawing of international balances and the increasing sway of China and Russia in an area long thought to be the domain of the United States. Still, the group is still much too diverse for Washington to be concerned about.

Comparably, there is likely to be a significant drive to enlarge the SCO during its annual summit in 2023. Iran is probably going to become a member. In addition, the leaders will probably advocate for Belarus's inclusion in the alliance. The Maldives, Bahrain, Kuwait, Myanmar, and the United Arab Emirates are set to become new dialogue partners in SCO-led cooperation initiatives. In the late 1990s, China, the Russian Federation, and the Central Asian countries formed the SCO. In the wake of the Cold War, it was initially meant to serve as a multilateral organization that would foster confidence and ease tensions between these former adversaries. The SCO fosters member collaboration on a range of operational matters, including counterterrorism, security, and economic growth. To promote regular cooperation among member nations, the organization, for instance, established the SCO Information Security Center, the SCO Counter-Terrorism Center, the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), and the SCO Centre against International Organized Crime.²⁵

Experts projected that the BRICS and SCO will keep obtaining new members in the future based on the existing pattern. The international system is equally adjusting to shifting realities as the globe enters a time of heightened geopolitical rivalry in the post-COVID arena. In this context,

²⁴ Aris, S. 2008. Russian–Chinese relations through the lens of the SCO. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 34, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Ifri_RNV_Aris_SCO_Eng.pdf.

²⁵ Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. 2009. Yekaterinburg declaration by the heads of the Member States of the SCO. <http://eng.sectsc.org/load/198293>.

Multilateralism requires to adapt to its strategic setting. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf governments are aware of the tacit extraction of the United States of America from the region.²⁶ They have become driven to diversify their security partnerships as a result of this paradigmatic transformation. Through this process, the nations have become closer to Russia and China. This is seen in the recent thawing of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was facilitated by China, and Iran and other Middle Eastern sovereigns' impending admission as the newest members of the SCO and BRICS.

Geopolitical Readjustments Based on New Global Order

The Middle Eastern nations' aspiration to attain more political independence in international interactions and to diversify and balance their security, economic, and diplomatic endeavors is further evidenced by their inclusion in the SCO. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was envisioned as a global governance model that would complement existing West-centric institutions like the EU, NATO, and QUAD.²⁷ With its focus on domestic matters, the SCO serves as a Eurasian forum that offers a strong foundation for enhancing South-South cooperation, free from the influence of European and American forces. This reflects the emergence of a new multipolar world where Asian nations—including China, Russia, and India—are progressively taking charge of leading their own diplomatic and economic blocs with the assistance of neighboring states.

Beijing is beginning to regard the Middle East as strategically significant because of China's interests in the area, which also span a wider spectrum of economic endeavors. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China is also the main investor in the Gulf (BRI). China now has US\$ 140 billion in investments in the GCC alone. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded China's investment portfolio in the Arab world to include a range of industries and transportation infrastructure, as well as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and emerging technologies. Saudi Arabia is the country that has benefited the most from Chinese investment in this context,

²⁶ Shekhar Gupta (2023), 'SCO, BRICS, RIC: What do they have in common? China at head of table, India faking smiles', The Print
https://theprint.in/national-interest/sco-brics-ric-what-do-they-have-in-common-china-at-head-of-table-india-faking-smiles/1558526/#google_vignette

²⁷ Marjani, Niranjan (2023), 'SCO and BRICS: Two Sides of the Same Coin for India', The Geopolitics
<https://thegeopolitics.com/sco-and-brics-two-sides-of-the-same-coin-for-india/>

demonstrating the increasing convergence of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative with other long-term projects like Saudi Vision 2030. Similarly, the Gulf monarchs will probably have access to new markets and infrastructure projects through their alliance with the SCO.²⁸

Multilateralism has not been a driving force for fair integration of the Middle East; rather, it has been more often linked to interference and the creation of chaos. Most of the Gulf countries, which have historically supported Washington, are becoming more tense due to the US's waning security assurances and OPEC+'s determination to reduce oil output to maintain high oil prices despite Russia's conflict in Ukraine. The influence of some Gulf Arab nations and Iran's choice to join the SCO and BRICS should not be overstated, though. Rather it can be defined as the era of Competitive Multilateralism in the Middle East. The Middle Eastern countries' endeavors to maintain a multipolar world order through a strategic balance between the great powers are largely responsible for their entry into a multilateral forum led by non-Western states. This is closely related to the emerging new regional order, where it is yet unclear how the final balance of power will settle.

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²⁸ Shekhar Gupta (2023), 'SCO, BRICS, RIC: What do they have in common? China at head of table, India faking smiles', The Print
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