A Military Stress Test for BRICS

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This article is an edited version of the paper written for the Valdai Discussion Club, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/military-stress-test-the-war-on-iran-and-brics/

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-3-186-192

The unprovoked U.S.-Israeli aggression against Iran, which has undermined the foundations of international law and the established world order, is the first serious stress test for the newly expanded BRICS. The organization's 2024–2025 enlargement (Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia) has been widely recognized as a historic success in building a platform for the World Majority, but has also shown that BRICS institutions are unprepared for conflict situations. The war has placed Iran and the UAE on opposite sides, while BRICS as a whole has no unified position.

BRICS members were divided in voting on anti-Iranian UN Resolution 2817. Russia and China abstained, while India and the UAE coauthored the resolution. Brazil adopted a moderate stance, although

it condemned the strikes on Iran, as did South Africa. Egypt, conversely, condemned strikes against "brotherly Arab nations." Ethiopia expressed concern primarily over its own energy security. BRICS consultations in New Delhi (24 April 2026) could not produce a joint statement, and instead ended with a brief summary from the Chairman acknowledging an internal split. The BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting (the organization's second-most-important annual gathering), held in mid-May in New Delhi, also failed to overcome these divisions, ending with a non-consensus Chairman's Statement noting disagreement, on a number of points, of certain (publicly known) members.[1]

In effect, three camps have emerged within BRICS. The 'sovereign-legal' group (Russia, China, Brazil, and South Africa) condemns the U.S.-Israeli attack. The 'regional-strategic' group (India, Egypt, and Ethiopia) is primarily concerned with its own security and energy supplies. Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (as a 'half-member') are themselves parties to the conflict.

There are also other smoldering conflicts, e.g., between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile.

This situation is unprecedented: previous clashes, e.g., between China and India, were kept contained, unable to interfere with long-term BRICS projects.

This has prompted a degree of *schadenfreude* in the West. As a Singaporean-based expert notes, BRICS is able to agree more on reformist language than on "a common posture when conflict threatens to impact concrete national interests." (Hussein, 2026) The core principles of BRICS—consensus, respect for sovereignty, and pragmatism—function in peacetime, but paralyze decision-making during disorder and confrontation. A fundamental flaw has been exposed in the "minimalist institutionalism" of which BRICS has been so proud—for it grants rights and benefits without obligations, flexibility without diktat, which is precisely what attracts so many new applicants and aspiring members.

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[1] Chair's Statement and Outcome Document at BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting, New Delhi (May 15, 2026). https://d2jiw2zrmmyqt8.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/15173225/BRICS_Chairs_Statement_May15_2026.pdf

A secondary consequence of the war for BRICS has been an energy and financial split: disruptions in energy markets benefit some members (including Russia), but are detrimental to the majority. Furthermore, the tightening sanctions against Iran and its supporters have forced BRICS members to choose between risking secondary sanctions or distancing themselves from Tehran. These frictions notwithstanding, the war may accelerate de-dollarization and promote the creation of independent payment and settlement systems within BRICS—one of its key objectives.

POSSIBLE TRAJECTORIES FOR BRICS

In Russia, some experts insist on BRICS's development based on the 'lowest common denominator,' while others argue that BRICS must become a fully-fledged institution of global governance, or the world will become increasingly chaotic, many World Majority countries will become less stable and secure, and BRICS itself will lose its attractiveness and influence (Karaganov et al., 2026).

In some Russian publications, the baseline scenario is one of ***ambition and reform***, in which BRICS becomes a "central institution of the World Majority," capable of filling the vacuum in global governance (Karaganov et al., 2026). Achieving this demands progress in seven areas: financial settlements (the prototype Mariana system); disaster response (BRICS Rescue); a new climate agenda (BRICS Nature); an analogue to the IEA (BRICS Power); food security (BRICS Feed); dialogue on military AI; and normative and educational cooperation. Further expansion of the agenda is probably undesirable.

However, although these issues are well-chosen and merit vigorous effort, the war may badly injure BRICS's developing organism. Hastily expanded on the eve of a global storm, BRICS and its new partners have encountered challenges of a magnitude that they cannot ignore. Nor can they discount more pessimistic scenarios.

The first of those is ***BRICS's fragmentation*** ('G20-ization'): degradation into yet another geopolitically lightweight forum containing several opposing factions. Political and security issues would be displaced by economic, climate, trade, and humanitarian

ones, as in the early stages of BRICS's formation. Two wings could emerge within BRICS—a pro-Western one and an "irreconcilable" one.

The second option is ***BRICS's 'Sinicization,'*** discussed in the West. If Russia weakens, or India and others become more dependent upon the West given deepening geopolitical rifts, then collapse may threaten BRICS, and China may be compelled to become arbiter and security guarantor, offering technological and diplomatic support to BRICS members. The influence of Russia and other members would then decline, BRICS would become an instrument of Chinese foreign policy, and some members might withdraw or maintain only a formal association.

A more realistic scenario is a ***'two-speed BRICS,'*** comprising an anti-Western core (China, Russia, and Iran) and an opportunistically hedging periphery (India, Brazil, the UAE, South Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia). This would entail differing directions and levels of integration: the core would deepen geopolitical, security, and even military cooperation, while the periphery would participate only in economic and humanitarian projects. Developments such as India's 'Special Strategic Partnership' with Israel (February 2026), and the UAE's withdrawal from OPEC, point in this direction.

Naturally, any of these scenarios would also affect the BRICS partner countries, which would also choose varying models and factions.

HOW CAN THE SITUATION BE REMEDIED?

The Gulf crisis may be a moment of truth, not a death sentence. The U.S.'s behavior under Donald Trump—including aggression against Iran and Venezuela, threats against Cuba, tariff wars, and pressure on South Africa to leave BRICS—may temporarily paralyze BRICS, but it also incentivizes BRICS consolidation. Yet BRICS should not and cannot become an anti-Western bloc, as this would diminish its attractiveness for many World Majority countries that do not wish to choose between the U.S. and China.

BRICS now faces a choice: to remain a talk-shop and gradually lose relevance or evolve into a conflict-response mechanism. If the bloc fails to propose an alternative security model (not necessarily a military

alliance, but a diplomatic platform for conflict prevention), then its less influential members and partners will seek guarantees directly from the U.S. or China. BRICS would then become a declarative club, while real influence would shift to bilateral alliances—especially if the West, driven to prolong its dominance and exploitation, overcomes its internal contradictions as it did in the past.

Thus, in order to remain relevant, BRICS must establish permanent structures for mediation, monitoring, and coordination of security issues. This should be done together with deeper financial and payment integration (central banks' digital currencies and BRICS Pay may gain momentum precisely as a means of insulating against dollar-based sanctions). The energy dimension may also play a role: the UAE's withdrawal from OPEC could trigger a domino effect and a restructuring of the global energy market. BRICS, encompassing both energy producers and consumers, could become a new platform for coordination in this sphere. AI and cybersecurity, developed independently of the West, may likewise serve as instruments of consolidation.

A BUREAUCRATIC REMEDY

BRICS must be based on 'soft institutionalization,' seeking not a unified alliance, but a flexible multi-level structure.

For years, I have argued for BRICS's urgent evolutionary institutionalization, beginning with the creation of bureaucratic mechanisms for coordination, monitoring, and preservation of institutional memory (Toloraya and Nikonov, 2013; Toloraya, 2015; Toloraya and Chukov, 2016).

Previously, 'minimalist institutionalism' provided flexibility and lowered the barrier to entry for new members. But the enduring rejection of bureaucracy is now causing a lack of continuity. Each chair country shapes the agenda according to its own priorities; previous decisions often remain unimplemented; and what institutional memory there is depends on the enthusiasm of individual states (namely Russia). With the addition of four/five members plus partners, the problem has become critical. New members are unfamiliar with the history of the

BRICS agenda, and some lack the bureaucratic resources needed to manage chairmanships involving hundreds of events (Karaganov et al, 2026).

How could 'soft institutionalization' be realized? Proposals for a secretariat, divided between members, are detached from the reality of international organizations' bureaucratic functioning. A BRICS Secretary-General, with few meaningful powers and a geographically dispersed staff, would be little more than a façade.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. A compact secretariat is needed, composed of one D-2 (per UN classification) official from each member, plus one D-1 or P-5 official from each partner. Some administrators (P-2 to P-4) would also be needed, with national quotas (like budgetary contributions) determined by a formula based on population size and GDP per capita. There should also be a technical staff recruited without quotas (G1–G7). The head of the secretariat would be appointed for a one-year term from the chair country and would, inter alia, be responsible for liaison with the chair's government. The budget for 50–60 staff can be easily estimated.

A physical headquarters would be most effective, preferably located in a relatively neutral setting. Potential examples include Macau or Goa, which are distant from national capitals and (thanks to Portuguese) feature two BRICS languages. Of course, the secretariat may also have branches in national capitals, staffed, inter alia, by locals, if the host country is willing to finance them.

The technical secretariat would perform a limited set of functions, including:

- monitor the implementation of decisions, maintain documentation, and prepare reports and recommendations for leaders and governments;
- in cooperation with the chair country, prepare meeting agendas and the accompanying briefing and analytical materials;
- coordinate the work of the various sectoral tracks;
- maintain contacts with global and regional international organizations;

- organize training and capacity-building for partners, new members, and the 'Friends of BRICS Club.'

This would still leave BRICS far short of a classical international organization with binding obligations and supranational bodies, and its members should not fear the emergence of diktat like in the EU. But such a mechanism may be sufficient for BRICS to pass the stress test of the current crisis, develop its own governance system, establish a crisis-response mechanism, pursue a common strategy—and even aspire to the role of global arbiter.

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