



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 33/2022

14 June 2022

Cyber in BRICS: Agendas & Undercurrents for BRICS Summit 2022

Divyanshu Jindal

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies

Keywords: BRICS, cyber, cyberspace, cyber diplomacy, cybersecurity



Image Source: iStock



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

As leading economies with progressively digitalised markets, BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are significant producers of 'data', considered to be the 'new oil'. The members are investing in digital infrastructure and have sought to establish necessary legislative policies and frameworks for safeguarding data and critical infrastructure from cyber threats. They have been active in cyber diplomacy and have engaged in efforts to protect sovereignty in cyberspace.

It is argued that by adopting new technology, BRICS can 'outmanoeuvre' the governance structures of the 'old world'.¹ To this end, the members have stated interest in a 'pentalateral' agreement to create a comprehensive system for issues in the cyber domain.² BRICS maintains a consistent stance towards the criticality of the UN as the most important venue for policy development regarding cybersecurity and governance. For many developing and emerging countries, BRICS presents an alternative to Western dominance in the global governance hierarchy. The same is true for cyberspace.

Today, as the Russia-Ukraine war drags on, questions over BRICS' practicality in a newly shaped geopolitical landscape are rising. In the near past, China and India have observed strained bilateral relations; Brazil has witnessed domestic challenges; and Russia is now being shunned by the Western capitals. The 2022 BRICS Summit (to be hosted by China on June 24) could bring some changes to the BRICS' dynamics, with new agendas taking shape. The group is looking to expand for the first time in 12 years. As BRICS expands, how cyber cooperation can transform is important to consider.

BRICS' commitment to challenges in the cyber domain has strengthened over the past decade. The Moscow Declaration after the 2020 BRICS Summit highlighted the emphasis on furthering cooperation in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) domain under both the UN and the BRICS framework.

More recently, cybersecurity was highlighted as a top priority by the BRICS leaders at the previous annual summit in September 2021. The member nations agreed to strengthen joint efforts to enhance cooperation through information sharing and the exchange of best practices. While underscoring the significance of establishing legal frameworks of cooperation among the members, the summit welcomed the successful conclusion of the UN mechanisms (the 'Group of Governmental Experts' and the 'Open-Ended Working Group') on cybersecurity and the use of the ICTs.³

Cyber in BRICS

Over the years, several countries have shown a desire to join BRICS. Beyond an increased stature in world politics, BRICS membership provides an avenue for countries to showcase their regional leadership credentials. In 2018, when Turkey expressed its interest in joining BRICS, it was argued that the group cannot expand until there is a 'fine-tuned mechanism' for new agreements.⁴ However, the situation seems to have changed. Last month, Russian Foreign Minister (FM) Sergei Lavrov relayed Saudi Arabia's and Argentina's desire to become full-fledged BRICS members.⁵ China has supported Russia's stance. The Chinese foreign ministry remarked that Beijing will actively promote BRICS expansion for global partners to join.⁶ An expanded BRICS will not only seek strengthened cooperation for challenges in the cyber domain but will also aim to forge a non-Western perspective toward international law and governance in cyberspace.

Argentina's membership has received strong support from its neighbour, Brazil.⁷ Brazil has backed both the US and Russian draft resolutions on cyber/information security issues in the UN. It worked on a bilateral agreement on cooperation on information security with Russia in 2018⁸ and has a Declaration of Intent on cooperation in ICT with India⁹. Argentina is in a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' with China, and despite increasing espionage-related concerns over Chinese firms like Huawei, Buenos Aires has welcomed the company for Argentina's cellular networks.¹⁰

Similarly, Indonesia has active cyber partnerships with its members. Jakarta signed a memorandum of mutual understanding on cybersecurity with India in 2017¹¹ and an agreement on cybersecurity cooperation with Russia in 2020¹². It has fully supported the Russian initiatives on information security at the UN. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, noted that as a strong representative of emerging economies, Indonesia is a potential candidate for BRICS expansion.¹³

The Russian FM has highlighted Saudi Arabia as another significant candidate. Amidst the Ukraine war and the Western shunning of Russian companies, products and services, Saudi Arabia has welcomed Kaspersky (Russia-based cybersecurity and anti-virus company) to Riyadh.¹⁴ It is argued that though Riyadh has traditionally relied on Washington for security assistance, it no longer feels the same way since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This has resulted in closer Moscow-Riyadh relations. For India too, Saudi Arabia has assumed greater significance in recent years. The two countries are mutually identifying new areas of cooperation in intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, AI, and cybersecurity.¹⁵ While the above facts highlight that BRICS expansion can bolster its cyber agenda, several underlying factors affect this situation.

Undercurrents

Currently, the Budapest Convention serves as the sole international treaty addressing cybercrimes. It seeks to harmonize national laws, improve investigative techniques, and increase cooperation among nations. While several non-European states have acceded, Russia, India, and China (RIC) have remained non-signatory. India maintains that the convention was drawn without its participation. For Russia, some aspects of the convention are unacceptable as they violate state sovereignty. To overcome what has been termed 'Cyber imperialism', RIC seeks to coordinate efforts toward new cybersecurity frameworks. Deliberations over a Russia-proposed mechanism for cybercrime have been ongoing in the UN since 2019.

At the previous summit, the leaders agreed to cooperate on establishing legislative frameworks for the cyber domain. However, since then, Brazil has signed the Budapest Convention. For BRICS, this highlights a point of divergence from strategic consensus and will complicate BRICS' priorities toward cyber cooperation.¹⁶

Another concern is the strained India-China relations. An increasingly aggressive China (both in the physical and cyber realms) has encouraged New Delhi toward closer cooperation with Western partners. This is visible in India's increasing engagement with the Quad, where cybersecurity is now a top priority. In this light, India's ability, and vision towards balancing national interests in the Quad and BRICS will come under the spotlight.

Way Ahead

To some extent, the frictions and divergent interests among the members indicate the fragile state of the group. For RIC countries, BRICS serves as a significant avenue for consensus building and seeking equality on global governance issues. An expansion can re-strengthen BRICS and help reinforce its values and agenda. It will also provide an opportunity for Russia to reinforce BRICS' stance on information security. For China, it will help boost its clout in global politics as nations seek non-Western alternatives for cooperation.

As BRICS is characterized by members having significantly different political systems and ideologies, intra-BRICS frictions run the risk of grounding the group's potential. With every member pursuing its agenda, harmonisation of interests will be an absolute necessity for BRICS expansion. How the members deal with increasing global tensions between the East and the West is also a question.

NOTES

- ¹ Samir Saran, "A Decade of BRICS: Indian Perspectives for the Future", *Observer Research Foundation*, September 04, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/decade-of-brics-indian-perspectives-future/>. Accessed on May 30, 2022.
- ² Luca Belli, "Brazil Joins The Convention On Cybercrime: How Will It Impact Other BRICS Countries?", *Medianama*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.medianama.com/2022/02/223-brazil-budapest-convention-cybercrime-impact-brics/>. Accessed on May 30, 2022.
- ³ XIII BRICS Summit- New Delhi Declaration, *Ministry of External Affairs India*, September 09, 2021, <https://brics2021.gov.in/brics/public/uploads/docpdf/getdocu-51.pdf>. Accessed on May 28, 2021.
- ⁴ "BRICS talks Turkey: Erdogan's wish to join group cannot be fulfilled now, expert says", *TASS*, July 30, 2018, <https://tass.com/world/1015343>. Accessed on May 29, 2022.
- ⁵ PTI, "Actively support Russia's move to expand BRICS bloc, says China", *Business Standard*, May 27, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/actively-support-russia-s-move-to-expand-brics-bloc-says-china-122052701398_1.html. Accessed on June 1, 2022.
- ⁶ "BRICS Group Expected To Expand Soon: China", *NDTV*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/for-the-first-brics-groups-is-expected-to-begin-expansion-says-chinese-foreign-ministry-3017921>. Accessed on June 1, 2022.
- ⁷ "With key backers onboard, Argentina moves closer to joining BRICS group", *Buenos Aires Times*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/economy/with-key-backers-onboard-argentina-moves-closer-to-joining-brics-group.phtml>. Accessed on May 29, 2022.
- ⁸ Sergey Sebekin, "International Information Security Aspects of BRICS Enlargement", *InfoBRICS*, July 16, 2021, <https://infobrics.org/post/33733#>. Accessed on June 2, 2022.
- ⁹ "Ambassador Dinesh Bhatia hosted 1st meeting between India & Argentina under Joint Declaration of Intent on cooperation in ICT", *Embassy of India Buenos Aires*, April 19, 2022, https://www.indembarg.gov.in/event_detail/?eventid=563. Accessed on June 2 2022.
- ¹⁰ Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America", *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>. Accessed on June 3, 2022.
- ¹¹ PTI, "India, Indonesia tie-up to enhance cybersecurity ties", *Economic Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://ciso.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/india-indonesia-tie-up-to-enhance-cybersecurity-ties/57643756>. Accessed on June 2, 2022.
- ¹² "Russia, Indonesia agree to cooperate on information security", *TASS*, December 14, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1375155>. Accessed on June 2, 2022.
- ¹³ "BRICS will welcome new members, to better represent voices of emerging market economies: experts", *Global Times*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1266202.shtml>. Accessed on June 3, 2022.
- ¹⁴ "Russian cyber security firm Kaspersky opens new office in Saudi Arabia", *Arab News*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2067031/business-economy>. Accessed on June 3, 2022.
- ¹⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "India, Saudi Arabia armies explore new areas of cooperation including intel sharing & counterterrorism", *Economic Times*, February 16, 2022, <https://economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-saudi-arabia-armies-explore-new-areas-of-coop-including-intel-sharing-counterterrorism/articleshow/89605524.cms>. Accessed on June 3, 2022.
- ¹⁶ Luca Belli, "Brazil Joins The Convention On Cybercrime: How Will It Impact Other BRICS Countries?", n. 2