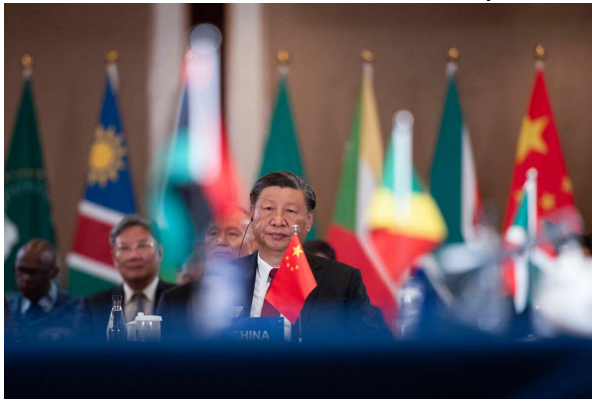


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Is BRICS+ an Anti-Colonial Formation Worth Cheering From the Left? Far From It.

BRICS+ is not a new Non-Aligned Movement seeking to redistribute global wealth but an alliance of aspiring hegemons.

[Tithi Bhattacharya](#) & [Gareth Dale](#) ,
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President of China Xi Jinping looks on at the China-Africa Leaders' Roundtable Dialogue on the last day of the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, on August 24, 2023.

In December 1954, the African American novelist Richard Wright, then living in Paris, happened to idly pick up a newspaper. He later wrote in his book *The Color Curtain* that what he saw in that newspaper so “baffled” him that he had to read the news item twice: 29 free and independent nations of Asia and Africa were planning to meet in Bandung, Indonesia, “to discuss racialism and colonialism.” As far as Wright was concerned, at Bandung the “despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed—in short, the underdogs of the human race were meeting.”

In August 2023, on a planet torn by war, inequality and climate devastation, some of those 29 countries met again in Johannesburg, South Africa, as BRICS — a geopolitical grouping that previously consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, China and

South Africa — welcomed six new member nations into its coalition: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

One could almost sense a shadow of the Bandung Conference of 1955 when the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa characterized the expansion this year as “a new chapter in [an] effort to build a world that is fair, a world that is just, a world that is also inclusive and prosperous.”

A section of the left is rejoicing at this new dispensation and drawing explicit analogies with previous anti-colonial formations such as Bandung and the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression. Is the comparison valid? Is BRICS+ a new anti-colonial formation challenging the Western imperial stranglehold over the planet?

The Bandung Moment

There was much sense in Richard Wright’s optimism about the Bandung Conference of 1955. The nations gathered there may have defined imperialism differently from each other, but they were clear in their opposition to it. Most of the leaders at Bandung had led successful anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggles in their own nations, and in doing so, had often borne great sacrifices. As the representative from the Philippines, Carlos Romulo, put it, “The age of empire is being helped into oblivion by the aroused will and action of the people determined to be masters of their own fate ... the old structure of Western empire will and must pass from the scene.”

The Bandung Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement that flowed from it, represented a historic alliance of newly independent countries. Led by the likes of Sukarno, Kwame Nkrumah, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ho Chi Minh and Gamal Nasser, it conveyed something of the spirit of the anti-colonial revolution, a monumental transformation of global order. The Non-Aligned Movement, moreover, channeled a

critique of the imperialist carve-up of the world between the U.S.-led “West” and the Soviet bloc.

It is certainly true that critique of the Soviets was far more muted in this milieu than that of the West; but it was not altogether absent. The prime minister of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Sir John Kotelawala, for instance, caused the prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, much grief when he referred to Eastern European countries as “colonies.”

As Roeslan Abdulgani documents in his book, *The Bandung Connection*, Kotelawala once asked, “Are not these colonies as much as any of the colonial territories in Africa or Asia?” when referring to Eastern European countries at a meeting of the Political Committee of the Conference. “Should it not be our duty openly to declare opposition to Soviet colonialism as much as Western imperialism?” he added.

The West, in turn, was not pleased to have its “sphere of influence” challenged, and even tried to control membership to this new formation by excluding China. An enraged Nehru wrote to the newly formed United Nations:

We have no desire to create a bad impression about anything in the US and the UK. But the world is somewhat larger than the US and the UK and we have to take into account what impressions we create in the rest of the world. ... For us to be told, therefore, that the US and the UK will not like the inclusion of China in the Afro-Asian Conference is not very helpful. In fact, it is somewhat irritating. There are many things that the US and the UK have done which we do not like at all.

In the end, China’s membership was limited to observer status. While it could point to its experience of colonial plunder and oppression, its close alliance with the USSR until 1960 was the antithesis of non-alignment.

New International Economic Order

The Bandung Conference was a milestone in a burgeoning movement against the ongoing world-grab by the dominant powers. In the 1960s, the Group of 77 (G77) was formed, with China once again taking an ambivalent position. A directing role was taken by the Argentinian radical economist Raúl Prebisch. The Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 alike were crucibles in which radical theory flourished: Prebisch's structuralism, as well as postcolonial and dependency theories. Together, the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 opposed apartheid, advocated disarmament and, above all, acted as platforms for the mid-1970s "revolt" of Third World nations: the movement for a New International Economic Order.

The movement for a New International Economic Order can be thought of as a "radical reformist" challenge to the Western-led order. It advocated nationalization of resources and the regulation of transnational corporations, as well as measures to bolster and stabilize commodity prices (notably through producer cartels such as OPEC), collective management of the seabed and the moon, a loosening of patent and copyright conventions, and increased aid, debt forgiveness and technology transfers from the rich countries.

While their anti-imperialism was incontestable, however, the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 were also, and in the final reckoning, a collection of nation states representing domestic capitalist interests. Each was pressing for improved terms against those set by the great powers, but also at times in alliance with them and in competition with one another. The coalition bore the marks of these contradictory currents; for instance, when Cuba's Fidel Castro supported Moscow's invasion of an active Non-Aligned Movement member, Afghanistan. Further, postcolonial nation states continued many of the repressive traditions and institutions that they had either inherited from their past colonial masters — or, as in the case of Brahminical oppression in India, from their precolonial past. In other words, the Non-Aligned Movement and G77 functioned as spaces of political anti-imperialism but also as fissiparous groupings of nation states, each one a center of competitive capital accumulation.

Bandung vs. BRICS+

The Non-Aligned Movement and G77 were forums for governments to pitch moderate demands to international organizations, couched in terms of international law. Simultaneously, however, they were channeling something of the “underdog’s” fury at the plunder, deprivation and humiliation to which they had for centuries been subjected.

Is this what we are now witnessing in BRICS and its expansion? Absolutely not.

One difference lies in the conjuncture. The 1950s to 1970s witnessed the mobilization of postcolonial states at a time when they made up only around a quarter of global GDP. The current moment, in contrast, is defined by hegemonic contestation between the U.S. and China. Each can lay claim to be the world’s biggest economy, one by nominal GDP, the other by purchasing power parity. The world’s most profitable company today (Aramco) is based in a BRICS+ member, Saudi Arabia, a nation whose per capita GDP now exceeds several countries of Western Europe — a far cry from the age of the Non-Aligned Movement and the movement for a New International Economic Order when it was a middle-income economy dominated by Western multinationals.

Another difference is in the politics. The G77, for instance, was vocal and consistent in its critique of South African apartheid, but there have been no similar BRICS+ critique of Israeli apartheid. And one of the newly added members of BRICS+, Saudi Arabia, has been trumpeting its “historic” megadeal with Israel, without a peep from its BRICS fellows.

BRICS+, a grouping of countries led by the aspirant hegemon, challenges the established world order, but ultimately their animating spirit is the same: capital accumulation. Their struggle is with who rules the roost, and not with the pecking order itself. It is no surprise that debt forgiveness is nowhere on its agenda, given that China is the world’s biggest creditor nation. Even Vijay Prashad, one of its

principal cheerleaders, concedes that, “BRICS does not seek to circumvent established global trade and development institutions such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF ... [but] reaffirmed the importance of the rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core.”

In Prashad’s vision, the Chinese-led bid to usurp the West’s grip will rely on commercial power, but also on a dominant position in the production and trade of fossil fuels, and control of strategic locations, such as Suez and the Strait of Hormuz. BRICS+, he writes, has created “a formidable energy group” comprising of coal-producing China, India and South Africa alongside oil giants Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Russia, as well as Egypt — Africa’s fifth-largest oil producer. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, he adds, has been constructing “a web of oil and natural gas platforms around the Global South,” while the invoicing of Iraqi and Russian oil in renminbi, and perhaps of China-bound Saudi oil too, is “undermining the petrodollar system.” That Prashad glories in the envisioned drilling of colossal quantities of oil into the distant future, with silence on the environmental consequences, tells a troubling story.

Is it good to see U.S. hegemony challenged? Yes, but by a new Beijing-led bloc? No. Should one prefer, then, a reassertion of Western hegemony? No also.

China’s hegemonic bid could certainly derail. It faces challenges, notably an overaccumulation crisis, vividly apparent in the travails of its real estate behemoths Evergrande and the surreally named Country Garden, as well as environmental and demographic pressures, and all on top of Washington’s campaigns to block its technological ascent. Further down the line, the outcome of any skirmishes or war with the U.S. are utterly unpredictable. What is for sure, however, is that Beijing is maneuvering to challenge U.S. hegemony, and the BRICS expansion is part of that playbook.

China Rising

Any aspiring hegemon develops its capacity to project power along economic and geopolitical routes. England's imperial thrust began with mercantile interests honeycombing the overseas spheres of rival European empires; and similarly central to the U.S.'s was the intrusion of its businesses and credit institutions into Britain's "informal empire." The geopolitical track, in an age of democracy and nation states, requires a narrative whereby the aspirant claims to represent universal interests. As a nation born of anti-colonial revolution, the U.S. gained much from its ability to present itself, notably at Versailles and in the Atlantic Charter, as champion of the rights of all peoples to self-rule, the voice of the underdogs seeking to rewrite the rules of the system and break up the closed shop of European colonial powers. Even the Bandung Conference began with a reference to Paul Revere's ride to invoke the anti-colonial origins of the U.S.

Some of these same elements accompany China's rise. Having supplanted the U.S. as the major trading partner of most of the world's nations, it enjoys a solid starting position in the new Cold War that the U.S. initiated as it strives to head off the new rival. In comparison with the previous Cold War, territory is less central. What counts more, in a world that has already been warrened by Chinese business interests, is control over digital networks, supply chains, infrastructure and finance. Consequently, the new Cold War allegiances are made of a looser fabric. They tend to be less absolute; they are partial, and subject to ongoing push-and-pull. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Argentina exemplify the point.

At first, China's hegemonic bid focused on trade and credit networks, most visibly through Belt-and-Road infrastructure projects. The BRICS expansion represents a shift from geo-economic to geopolitical power projection. It is unfolding during a phase of geopolitical tension. Following on from the Trump and Biden-led trade wars with Beijing, the Ukraine War sharpened the lines of hegemonic contest. Washington utilized the war to wrest advantage its way, through the uptick in LNG sales, through the resubordination of the EU, the legitimacy fillip for NATO, and the worldwide tilt toward militarization — the domain in which the U.S. excels. The war

also brought advantage to China, through its growing financial sway over Russia, which, in addition to China's gargantuan loan book in South America, Africa and Asia, has enabled the renminbi to begin to be augured as a potential global currency.

Democracy and Dispossession

There is a reason why the BRICS+ coalition is able to invoke an (albeit faux) anti-imperial rhetoric. Current and future BRICS members have something in common: they are challenging the right of the United States and the European Union to dictate the design of the world's political and economic architecture.

In response, the Western powers hit back that China and Russia are autocracies and deserve condemnation for their appalling human rights records. The Biden administration has made repeated claims that the dividing line in the world is between a U.S.-led bloc of law-abiding democracies, and repressive autocracies.

This democracy vs. autocracy framework is refuted by even a cursory look at Washington's consistent support for authoritarian regimes, crowned by Biden's fêting of Narendra Modi, a fascist whose support for lynchings and pogroms against Muslims and Dalits is now becoming institutionalized in law. If one adds in the recent treatment of refugees by European countries (including the mass murder of those aboard the *Adriana*), the gerrymandering of voting districts in the U.S., or the continued brutality of the U.S. state apparatus toward Black people, the democratic bloc loses its shine.

This, however, does not mean the charge of authoritarianism against BRICS+ members ought to be rejected. It should be of serious concern to the left and to all human rights activists that the world's most tyrannical and repressive regimes are seeking to collaborate and to bolster their power. Scenes of police brutality on the streets of Ferguson or the borders of Europe have their mirrors on the streets of Delhi as bulldozers crush Muslim homes; in Tehran, as authorities fire on women protesters; in the horrors that Vladimir Putin has unleashed in Ukraine; or in the so-called

Uyghur re-education camps in Xinjiang province. The U.S. allies in BRICS+ — Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia — are similarly no slackers when it comes to repression of their own citizens and deplorable treatment of incomers.

The real problem of leftists subscribing to Washington's democracy vs. autocracy framework is not in the charge of autocracy, but in the solution implicit in the charge. Washington and its allies want a reassertion of their global hegemony by any means necessary, whether through trade wars, proxy wars or threats of regime change. Any left worth its salt should challenge authoritarianism not by cheerleading other capitalist powers but by building solidarity movements from below.

Conclusion

The BRICS expansion represents a triumph for President Xi. Nowhere is this truer than in the ushering of Riyadh and Teheran jointly into a fraternal organization — a move that has reminded the world that U.S. hegemony has brought the region nothing but bloodshed.

BRICS+, however, has several roadblocks to overcome before it can evolve as a firm and coherent alliance, let alone a harmonious one. The challenges will not be due necessarily to the hierarchy within the BRICS+ — for example China's neo-colonialism and racism in Africa. After all, the Netherlands and Britain and the U.S. all demonstrated that colonialism and neo-colonialism are necessary to, rather than undermining of, hegemony. Yet successful hegemony, in the age of nation states, requires firm allies as well as vassals.

U.S. hegemony is a function of its economic and military dominance and the rules and institutions established when its power was at its zenith, but also of the shared commitments of other major states to liberal values and democratic government. BRICS+, given the absence of any shared political values, will struggle to cohere. And although China's position within it is currently peerless, with its GDP nearly six

times that of India (its nearest rival), that gap is likely to narrow. Other intra-BRICS+ rivalries, notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran, could easily flare too.

As we write, the G20 are meeting in Delhi. The novelist Arundhati Roy, writing from there, gave an account of the poor being “purged from the city,” the slums being “screened off.” It is as if, she said, the government is ashamed of its own people. This is the real contradiction at the heart of BRICS+: an alliance of aspiring hegemons as opposed to the redistribution of wealth and dignity as are the old.

Hope lies, as always, not in challenging BRICS+ from a rejuvenated White House or Downing Street but in the streets of Delhi, Tehran and Beijing.