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# BRICS expansion - a wrongly set goal, which will not be fulfilled



BRICS leaders are meeting for the 15th time at the annual summit of the organisation that wants lead the developing world, but without a clear concept of enlargement, which was previously set as the goal of the meeting in Johannesburg.

This year's meeting of BRICS leaders will take place without one of the founders, Vladimir Putin. He has been cautious about travelling abroad due to the indictment and arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed in Ukraine.

Until recently, this has been the biggest problem of the alliance of the largest developing economies. But after a recent solution, according to which Putin will address the participants via video message, there was little time and desire left to dedicate the summit to the priority goal - the decision on the admission of new members.

On the first day of the summit in Johannesburg, there was no final confirmation whether the 5-member alliance would admit new members. Moreover, it is almost definite that there will be no expansion.

Only a week ago, Naledi Pandor, South Africa's head of diplomacy, could not confirm the admission of new members, but only the work on membership criteria.

"As chair, SA has continued to hold discussions on membership that has built significant convergence on possible models for the expansion process as well as the guiding principles, standards, criteria and procedures. We continue to meet towards building consensus and hope to have some concrete progress at the summit", said the South African minister ahead of the summit.

## Is the bloc ready for expansion?

Even though her statement should encourage BRICS members and candidates for membership that the expansion process has been going according to plan, Minister Pandor said that the bloc "was not quite ready to accept" new members just 2 months ago.

"Once we have a document that offers clear guidance, we will then take that to the summit in August. We'd like that work to be concluded by the time the summit sits", Pandor said at the preparatory ministerial meeting of BRICS at the beginning of last June.

There was a significant bidding procedure during preparations for the summit in Johannesburg regarding the number of countries that expressed their desire to join the alliance. Considerable differences in the number of aspirants were clarified a few days before the summit resulting in 23 countries on the list of candidates for membership.

The number of candidates was significantly lower than some previously mentioned, primarily by South African officials.

## Irreconcilable differences regarding the admission of new members

However, candidates could not count on being accepted until the last moment. The differences regarding expansion among the founding fathers are too significant to be resolved in one leadership meeting, even if it was named "historic" during preparations.

China has been the biggest proponent of BRICS expansion, the largest economy, and the most politically influential country in the alliance. It has been dictating this trend, guided by its own interests and less by the interests of the alliance.

Expanding the alliance would give China a new platform to expand its influence towards regions and countries over which it already exerts strong economic, political and security influence.

Also, by expanding the BRICS, China would receive a significant confirmation of its undiminished global influence when its Belt and Road strategic initiative has been losing momentum.

India has resisted China's efforts and demanded respect for the prior principle of membership by invitation and for the expansion to apply only to nations with a propensity towards democracy; not those with authoritarian governments.

India does not want to be trapped in a bloc where its vote will be affected by new members, who owe their place in the club to China's efforts.

Brazil has also advocated the gradual accession of potential candidates through the model of an observer or "partner country", which already exists in other organisations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

## Wrong focus

Instead of an historic phase, the expansion of BRICS could turn into its opposite because the strategic goal for which the summit in South Africa has been chosen, was chosen incorrectly.

Enlargement alone would not give new content to BRICS, nor would it contribute to the creation of its identity, which the founders have been pursuing since day one. It would get more members, but the question is, what are

they really gathered around?

Emphasising that BRICS members account for 40% of the global population and a quarter of the world economy has for too long and in less remarkable ways been a principal determinant in the question - what is the BRICS?

Economist Jim O'Neill, who coined the acronym BRIC, wrote in an article that apart from the formation of the New Development Bank ten years ago, "it is difficult to see what the group has done other than meet annually".

A potential membership expansion will not change that fact. It has been a priority in the bloc, whose authoritarian structure prefers quantity over quality and mass over content.

However, if the summit in Johannesburg resolves the deadlock, the BRICS will face the same problems at the next summit in a year. New members will not change that.