



Life After Expansion: The BRICS Quest for Institutional Coherence

THAÍS DÓRIA & GUSTAVO DE CARVALHO

Executive summary

The expansion of BRICS from five founding members to 10 full members, plus 10 partners, has enhanced the bloc's global influence while creating institutional challenges for its consensus-based governance model. This policy insight examines these dynamics through Brazil's 2025 chairmanship, showing how the enlarged membership manages divergent interests through adaptive mechanisms: agenda refinement, inclusive statement language and phased decision-making processes. The analysis identifies key institutional development opportunities, including enhanced coordination mechanisms, improved integration of newer members and strengthened knowledge management systems. Most reform proposals were deferred during Brazil's tenure, reflecting both the complexity of institutional change and the bloc's cautious approach to structural adaptation. Findings suggest that targeted, low-bureaucracy measures such as a shared document repository, standardised onboarding for new members and streamlined working group structures could significantly enhance operational coherence without undermining the group's identity as a flexible, horizontal platform for South–South cooperation.

Introduction

The BRICS expansion from five to 10 members,¹ alongside a new circle of 10 partner countries,² marks a turning point in the group's evolution. The enlargement signals a rising demand for alternative multilateral forums but also exposes urgent questions about the bloc's coherence and purpose. Countries with starkly different economic profiles and strategic priorities now sit around the same table, magnifying the difficulty of forging common positions in a fragmented global order.

Existing structural limitations in BRICS compound its institutional pressures

Existing structural limitations in BRICS compound its institutional pressures. BRICS operates informally across three broad pillars: political and security cooperation; economic and financial collaboration; and people-to-people (P2P) exchanges. The group functions

1 The 10 full members comprise the original five founding states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), four countries that joined in 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates) and Indonesia (January 2025). Saudi Arabia was invited in 2023 but has neither accepted nor declined; Brazil's 2025 presidency lists it as a member despite this ambiguity.

2 The 10 partner countries are Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Partner status, introduced in 2024, allows participation in meetings without voting rights.

through annual summits, ministerial meetings and over 180 mechanisms, including working groups. Many of these platforms lack clear mandates or reporting lines, and the consensus rule that once bound five like-minded members now strains under 10. Coordination gaps, duplication and uneven follow-through have become persistent concerns.³

In 2025, Brazil assumed the rotating BRICS presidency, with an ambitious six-priority agenda covering global health cooperation; trade, investment and finance; climate change; artificial intelligence (AI) governance; multilateral peace and security; and institutional development. As part of this agenda, Brazil worked throughout the year to build consensus within the group aiming to advance institutional priorities, strengthen predictability of action and enhance coherence across different presidencies.

However, the Rio Declaration, issued after the July summit, recorded only 'ongoing efforts' to revise the terms of reference and invited future chairs to carry the work forward.⁴ This limited outcome reflects how the breadth of competing priorities contributed to institutional reform being sidelined, as other issues were seen as more urgent and less politically uncomfortable than pushing for internal changes to the governance of BRICS. The challenge extends beyond political sensitivities to include basic operational gaps. The terms of reference, although widely cited in official communications, remain unavailable online, showing how resource constraints and competing demands leave even fundamental aspects of institutional continuity unaddressed.

This policy insight examines how BRICS can adapt its governance after expansion without losing the flexibility that defines its identity. It explores three mechanisms the group uses to manage diversity and contrasts the institutional experience of the New Development Bank (NDB) with the loose approach to political enlargement. It also reviews the limits encountered by Brazil and outlines practical steps, such as better knowledge management, standardised onboarding and more streamlined working groups.

The consensus imperative: How BRICS responds to internal diversity

Initially formed by Brazil, Russia, India and China, the BRICS grouping evolved from an economic label for emerging markets into a political coalition aimed at reforming global governance, particularly financial systems. The four original BRIC countries held their first meeting at the level of foreign ministers in 2006, followed by their first summit of heads of state in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Their collective push for a more representative and

3 BRICS Think Tanks Council, *Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms*, Preliminary Report (Institute for Applied Economic Research, June 2025).

4 BRICS, "Rio de Janeiro Declaration: Strengthening Global South Cooperation for a More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance", July 6, 2025, 14.

equitable global financial order gained momentum in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2011, South Africa formally joined the group, transforming BRIC into BRICS.

The group's identity has traditionally centred on a shared commitment to reforming global governance institutions to better reflect the voices and interests of developing countries. Rooted in the principle of inclusive multilateralism, BRICS has positioned itself as a complement to the Bretton Woods institutions. Its character is guided by the goals of democratising international decision-making, strengthening multilateralism and promoting balanced development across a range of issues, including finance, climate and technology. However, translating this shared vision has proven increasingly challenging as BRICS has expanded both in membership and in scope.

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The internal governance of BRICS remains relatively streamlined, as described in the terms of reference approved by its members in 2021.⁵ Routine coordination is handled by national Sherpas, who collect inputs from different ministries and shepherd draft outcomes for leaders. However, presidential responsibilities have expanded dramatically over the years, from coordinating diplomatic summits to managing complex networks spanning counterterrorism, vaccine research, women's innovation contests and polar science.⁶ The 2021 revised terms of reference allow each annual chair to create new working mechanisms, but offer no guidance on how to wind them down or merge them, leaving the BRICS structure to continue to grow without a clear path for streamlining.

This exponential growth in scope has strained the capacity of rotating presidencies to provide effective coordination without permanent institutional support.⁷ These coordination challenges are compounded by fundamental gaps in institutional memory, with no centralised repository for agreements and presidential websites often disappearing after each term, creating continuity deficits that complicate coordination across rotating leadership.

Ideas for establishing a permanent secretariat have surfaced periodically, including a formal proposal from the BRICS Think Tanks Council in 2017⁸ and renewed consideration

5 The 2021 BRICS terms of reference have not been released publicly; the details cited here are drawn from interviews with Brazilian officials conducted in Brasília during field research, April–July 2025.

6 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

7 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

8 BRICS Think Tanks Council, *Realizing the BRICS Long-Term Goals: Road-Maps and Pathways* (Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

in 2025 through discussions on creating a Troika system.⁹ The Troika, comprising the current, immediate past and incoming presidencies, was envisioned as a light coordination mechanism to improve continuity between summits by sharing institutional memory, aligning agendas and monitoring follow-up on commitments. While not a secretariat itself, it has been viewed as either a transitional step towards, or a governing structure within, permanent headquarters.

Yet member interest in formalising such arrangements has remained limited, underscoring the persistent tension between the appeal of greater operational efficiency and the group's attachment to its informal institutional identity. Against this backdrop, Rio de Janeiro's recent offer to host a permanent BRICS headquarters in the historic Jockey Club Brasileiro building highlights the symbolic value of such initiatives. It would physically anchor the bloc's presence while creating a dedicated venue for coordination and public engagement.¹⁰ The absence of any mention of the offer in the Rio Declaration, however, indicates that consensus on centralising operations has not been reached. As with earlier secretariat debates, the proposal's future will hinge on members' willingness to balance the efficiency benefits of a fixed institutional base with the flexibility that has long been a defining feature of BRICS cooperation.

Such challenges became clear in Brazil's 2025 presidency. Brazil put forward an ambitious agenda with six priorities. Squeezed between its 2024 G20 presidency and its preparations for COP 30 in November 2025, overlapping diplomatic commitments strained the government's capacity to pursue its institutional reform agenda effectively.

In particular, Brazil's emphasis on AI governance highlights a forward-thinking approach to contemporary challenges. By promoting inclusive and responsible AI regulation, BRICS aims to harness AI's potential to drive social, economic and environmental development across member states. This focus not only modernises the agenda but also provides a cross-cutting tool that could enhance progress in health, climate, finance and security – areas central to the group's broader priorities.

Indeed, beyond including AI governance as a key priority in the final declaration, the presidency also released a dedicated document titled 'BRICS Leaders' Statement on the Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence'.¹¹ This forced Brazil to pursue a more focused approach, reducing planned meetings from Russia's 250 to about 100. The BRICS Summit was also brought forward to July,¹² reflecting both efficiency goals and the practical limits of what a rotating presidency can coordinate without permanent administrative support. The overload of meetings creates corresponding strain on all member countries, placing enormous demands on national delegations' already stretched resources.

9 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

10 Igor Patrick, "Rio de Janeiro Seeks to Become BRICS Diplomatic Hub with Headquarters Proposal", *South China Morning Post*, July 12, 2025.

11 BRICS, "BRICS Leaders' Statement on the Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence", July 6, 2025.

12 Interview with Brazilian government official, April 2025.

Despite these operational pressures, BRICS maintains regular engagement at multiple levels, including among heads of state, ministers, senior officials and representatives from civil society. This multilevel structure has created growing coordination pressures, particularly between official and P2P tracks. During Brazil's 2025 presidency, the BRICS People's Forum was, for the first time, able to establish a formal channel of communication with Sherpas and seek participation in the Leaders' Summit. This unprecedented interaction signals a shift towards more systematic engagement between civil society and official decision-making structures, illustrating how the deepening inclusiveness in BRICS generates additional coordination demands.

Within this complex framework, the consensus-based model reinforces the principle of equality among members, although asymmetries in economic and political power persist

Within this complex framework, the consensus-based model reinforces the principle of equality among members, although asymmetries in economic and political power persist. Critically, this model operates not as a simple veto system, but as a mechanism compelling members to negotiate towards minimum common denominators, often requiring them to 'agree to disagree' on contentious issues while maintaining collective cohesion.¹³

This dynamic manifests in three distinct approaches when disagreements arise. First, particularly divisive issues may be entirely removed from the agenda, with BRICS often explicitly or implicitly acknowledging that other institutions are better positioned to address specific challenges. The notable absence of discussions on territorial disputes – whether in the South China Sea or along the India–China border – reflects a pragmatic recognition that bilateral mechanisms or regional forums are more appropriate venues. Similarly, the Rio Declaration's treatment of the Ukraine conflict exemplifies this approach, with the text simply recalling 'our national positions concerning the conflict in Ukraine as expressed in the appropriate fora, including the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly'.¹⁴ This effectively removes substantive discussion from the BRICS agenda while deferring to institutions with greater legitimacy and capacity for conflict mediation.

Such institutional modesty allows BRICS to focus on areas where consensus is achievable while avoiding the pretence of universal competence. This pragmatic approach extends beyond conflict-related issues to broader geopolitical tensions. The Rio Declaration also

¹³ Sanusha Naidu and Gustavo de Carvalho, "BRICS Expansion: Redefining Global Structural Power in a Changing World Order" (Policy Insight 160, South African Institute of International Affairs, 2025), 3.

¹⁴ BRICS, "Rio de Janeiro Declaration", 3.

deliberately avoided direct references to the US or President Donald Trump, despite heightened global tensions. This reflects many members' efforts to promote a positive, non-confrontational agenda that prioritises constructive dialogue over antagonistic rhetoric. This pattern illustrates BRICS countries' consistent preference for diplomatic pragmatism in areas where direct engagement might undermine group cohesion or distract from the bloc's core objectives of global governance reform.

Second, contentious topics may be addressed through deliberately diluted language that marks a collective position while avoiding practical commitments. UN Security Council (UNSC) reform exemplifies this pattern. For years, while Brazil, India and South Africa were directly named in BRICS declarations on UNSC reform, China and Russia expressed support only through indirect language, avoiding explicit attribution. Expansion to include Ethiopia and Egypt further complicated matters, as both African states favour the Ezulwini Consensus – the AU's collective position demanding two permanent UNSC seats for Africa. This contrasts with individual endorsements, such as those for South Africa. The difficulty of reaching consensus became evident when foreign ministers failed to issue a joint statement in April 2025, reportedly due to disagreements over this issue.¹⁵

Extensive negotiations produced compromise language in the Rio Declaration. It reads: 'China and Russia, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, reiterate their support to the aspirations of Brazil and India to play a greater role in the United Nations, including its Security Council.'¹⁶ This formulation allows China and Russia to signal support while avoiding explicit endorsement of permanent membership, by supporting 'aspirations to play a greater role' rather than concrete institutional change. The language satisfies multiple constituencies while deferring substantive commitments that could create internal divisions.

When issues are deemed sufficiently important, extensive negotiation processes can span multiple years until consensus emerges

Third, when issues are deemed sufficiently important, extensive negotiation processes can span multiple years until consensus emerges. The approach by BRICS to alternative payment systems illustrates this incremental progression. The 2023 Johannesburg Declaration contained limited language tasking finance ministers and central bank governors with considering local currencies and payment instruments.¹⁷ Two years later,

15 Lisandra Paraguassu, "Growing BRICS Group Shows Internal Rifts as Ministers Fall Short of Joint Statement", *Reuters*, April 29, 2025.

16 BRICS, "Rio de Janeiro Declaration", 2.

17 BRICS 2023, "XV BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration – BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism", August 23, 2023.

the Rio Declaration reflects substantial evolution: members now acknowledge progress by the BRICS Payment Task Force in identifying pathways for greater payment system interoperability, welcome a technical report on cross-border payments and articulate detailed objectives for facilitating faster, cheaper and more accessible payments among BRICS countries and beyond.¹⁸ This gradual refinement demonstrates how BRICS typically engages with sensitive topics through patient consensus-building, allowing members to incrementally commit to initiatives that might initially seem too ambitious or politically fraught for immediate agreement.

External geopolitical pressures significantly accelerated this internal consensus-building process, particularly the sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. These developments created urgent practical incentives for alternative payment mechanisms that transcended the group's typically gradual approach to sensitive financial cooperation. The momentum was already evident at the 2024 Kazan Summit in Russia, which marked a substantial push towards payment system alternatives, suggesting that the Rio Declaration's detailed language reflects not only patient internal negotiations but also the catalysing effect of shifts in the global financial and political landscape that made such cooperation both more necessary and more politically palatable for all members.

The consensus requirement has profound implications for decision-making velocity and institutional scope. It inherently favours incremental progress over transformative change, while encouraging a realistic assessment of institutional limitations in BRICS relative to other forums. Since its creation, BRICS has been able to build consensus across its diverse membership on multiple issues, but this typically comes at the cost of bold initiatives or rapid responses to global crises.

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The recent expansion demonstrates these constraints: Brazil's well-documented reservations about enlargement were ultimately overridden, not through a formal vote, but through sustained pressure at the level of heads of state and the understanding that blocking consensus would isolate Brazil within the group.¹⁹ Unable to impose their preference, Brazil and other reluctant members – such as India and, to a degree,

¹⁸ BRICS, "Rio de Janeiro Declaration".

¹⁹ Andre Pagliarini, "[Here's Why Brazil Is a Major Holdout against BRICS Expansion](#)", *Responsible Statecraft*, August 7, 2023.

South Africa – acquiesced to expansion while securing the introduction of the partner country category as a compromise that slowed the pace of extending full membership. This compromise was essential given the substantial demand for BRICS membership, with about 40 countries reportedly expressing interest in joining.²⁰ This solution, while pragmatic, introduces a potentially problematic hierarchical dynamic that echoes the very institutional structures BRICS has long criticised. The creation of two distinct tiers of participation risks undermining the bloc's egalitarian ethos and bears an uncomfortable resemblance to institutions like the UNSC, which BRICS members, particularly Brazil, have consistently condemned as undemocratic and in need of reform. This tension illustrates how internal compromises can inadvertently mirror the exclusionary practices the group seeks to transform, offering a glimpse into the challenges of future institutional development.

The bloc's expansion to 10 members and the introduction of the new partner country category have prompted renewed discussions on adapting governance mechanisms and ensuring operational effectiveness. However, the very process that enabled this expansion – lengthy consensus-building that accommodated the most enthusiastic members while managing dissent – suggests that future institutional reforms will likely follow similarly protracted timelines. The challenge for BRICS moving forward will be balancing the preservation of unity with the need for greater institutional capacity to manage an increasingly complex and diverse coalition. Success will depend on finding mechanisms that can accommodate growing membership while maintaining the flexibility that has traditionally defined BRICS, even as the group navigates the tension between its egalitarian aspirations and the hierarchical realities introduced by its own institutional compromises.

Institutional lessons and limits

The proliferating mechanisms in BRICS reveal significant variation in institutional effectiveness. A recent mapping by the BRICS Think Tanks Council recorded 184 cooperation mechanisms and, after merging overlaps, distilled them to 126 active bodies.²¹ The breadth is impressive and, in a few tracks, highly productive. Regular meetings

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20 Stewart Patrick et al., *BRICS Expansion and the Future of World Order: Perspectives from Member States, Partners, and Aspirants* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2025).

21 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

between finance ministers and central bank governors have delivered flagship institutions, such as the NDB and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), and continue to steer joint work on local-currency finance and payment systems. The agriculture pillar is another bright spot, having generated a shared information base and successive action plans on food security and climate-smart farming since 2010.

However, some BRICS cooperation mechanisms have produced limited publicly available outcomes despite operating for several years. For example, the Anti-Money Laundering Council appears to have no publicly accessible outcome documents, while the Vaccine Research and Development Centre, established in 2022, is still in the early stages of delivering substantive results.²² This uneven performance partly reflects the significant influence rotating chairs exert over the BRICS agenda, with presidencies often championing particular initiatives that may not sustain momentum once leadership rotates. The contrast between productive and dormant tracks highlights that the bloc's informal model is most effective when mandates are clear and resources are committed, rather than when mechanisms emerge from presidential preferences without broader member buy-in or institutional continuity.

The NDB offers instructive lessons about formal institutionalisation within the BRICS framework. Established in 2014, it represents a rare case of formal, treaty-based institutionalisation within an otherwise informal forum. Its operational effectiveness, measured by disbursement volumes reaching over \$30 billion and a growing project portfolio across infrastructure and sustainable development, stems from a carefully designed governance structure that balances openness with control. While the NDB is formally open to all UN members, its founding agreement guarantees BRICS members a minimum of 55% of total voting shares regardless of future expansion.²³ In practice, the original five members currently retain well above this threshold, ensuring that decision-making authority remains firmly concentrated among the acronym countries.²⁴

However, not all formal BRICS institutions from 2014 followed this trajectory. The CRA, a \$100 billion emergency fund designed to provide financial aid during balance-of-payments crises, was established alongside the NDB with similar fanfare. Yet, it has never been activated despite various regional economic crises, highlighting how institutional creation does not automatically translate into operational relevance. The contrast between the NDB's active lending and the CRA's dormancy suggests operational outcomes depend not merely on formal structures but also on sustained political commitment and clear operational mandates.

This institutional design has provided the bank with stability and coherent governance structures, enabling it to establish credibility and operational effectiveness. Recent NDB expansion suggests its growing appeal. Beyond the initial three additions of Bangladesh,

22 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

23 New Development Bank, *Agreement on the New Development Bank* (Fortaleza, 2014).

24 NDB, "Shareholding: Capital Structure & Subscription", accessed July 14, 2025, <https://www.ndb.int/about-ndb/shareholding/>.

Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, the bank has continued to expand, welcoming Algeria, Colombia, Uruguay and Uzbekistan as full members. Indonesia and Ethiopia's membership bids are under review, indicating continued institutional expansion. As Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva noted in July 2025, major countries, including Turkey, have also expressed interest in joining, suggesting that the NDB's institutional clarity and operational effectiveness are attracting broader membership despite the concentrated governance structure.²⁵

The recent BRICS expansion stands in marked contrast to the more formalised NDB institutional framework. Before the BRICS enlargement, its founding members created the 'BRICS Membership Expansion: Guiding Principles, Standards, Criteria and Procedures',²⁶ which outlined detailed guidelines, including commitments to multilateralism, UN reform and the Sustainable Development Goals. The document established a multistage process for progression from 'interested country' to full membership, involving assessment by BRICS Sherpas, foreign ministers and leaders.

However, despite this apparent procedural rigour, the expansion at the 2023 Summit proceeded somewhat abruptly. While the document specified membership criteria, it set neither binding integration frameworks nor mechanisms to manage how enlargement would affect decision-making, internal governance or the bloc's operational coherence. In practice, China and Russia's strong advocacy for expansion ultimately prevailed over Brazil and India's reservations, suggesting that new countries were invited following horse-trading that reflected internal power asymmetries rather than the equal consultation implied by formal procedures.

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The consequences of this institutional gap are already apparent. New member integration is proceeding unevenly, with some mechanisms, such as the Agriculture Ministers' Meeting and the Culture Ministers' Meeting, successfully incorporating all recent additions. In contrast, others remain limited to original members, including the Digital

25 Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "Discurso Do Presidente Lula Na Abertura Da 10ª Reunião Anual Do Novo Banco de Desenvolvimento Do BRICS" [Speech by President Lula at the Opening of the 10th Annual Meeting of the BRICS New Development Bank], Planalto, Brazilian Republic Presidency, July 4, 2025.

26 BRICS 2023, "BRICS Membership Expansion: Guiding Principles, Standards, Criteria and Procedures", 2023.

Financial Inclusion Working Group and the Political Parties Dialogue.²⁷ This creates an ad hoc two-tier system that risks undermining the bloc's egalitarian principles and confusing external partners about who speaks for BRICS on specific issues.

Meanwhile, BRICS has broadened its scope well beyond the development finance focus that enabled the NDB's defined institutional scope. The recent expansion and the introduction of new partner countries reveal an eagerness to engage more states across a broader thematic agenda, ranging from geopolitical coordination to security, technology and cultural exchange. This thematic proliferation has created coordination challenges, as multiple BRICS countries now engage with external bodies, including the International Labour Organization, UNESCO and the Financial Action Task Force.²⁸ Without systematic oversight, BRICS risks adopting contradictory positions in international forums, where the group could strengthen its position by speaking with a unified voice. Additionally, the widening scope could dilute the bloc's original ethos of focused cooperation for global governance reform.

The institutional strain is further evidenced by growing bottom-up pressure for better coordination from within BRICS mechanisms themselves. Working groups often independently develop memoranda of understanding, update operational frameworks and establish secretariat functions, reflecting an organic demand for institutional development across the system rather than solely top-down presidential initiatives.

Brazil's institutional agenda: Ambition meets reality

Brazil's presidency prioritised institutional development in response to what its Concept Note described as 'deepening geopolitical tensions that challenge the fragile international multilateral order'.²⁹ This context had expanded the scope and complexity of BRICS cooperation, creating coordination challenges that Brazil argued required systematic attention.

Brazil identified several specific institutional deficits. The bloc's informal architecture, while functional in a smaller configuration, now struggled to maintain 'cohesion, harmonisation and efficiency' with 10 full members and 10 partners.³⁰ Presidency transitions had become increasingly difficult without standardised procedures, and the integration of new members proceeded unevenly across different mechanisms. Brazil argued that these challenges required the bloc to improve its decision-making processes and sectoral cooperation, while consolidating its role as a platform for international partnership.

27 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

28 BRICS Think Tanks Council, "Portfolio of BRICS Cooperation Mechanisms".

29 BRICS 2025, "Nota Conceitual: Fortalecendo a Cooperação do Sul Global Para uma Governança Mais Inclusiva e Sustentável" [Concept Note: Strengthening Global South Cooperation for More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance], 2025, 1.

30 BRICS 2025, "Nota Conceitual", 5.

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To address these challenges, it proposed the creation of a Task Force on Institutional Development with two main objectives: updating the terms of reference and discussing new procedural frameworks adapted to the bloc's expanded membership. The proposal was a response to recent developments, including the Johannesburg expansion and Kazan's creation of a partner category, which introduced new participation tiers without clearly defined roles.

Officials were careful to frame these proposals not as steps toward rigid formalisation but as a pragmatic effort to enhance coherence while preserving the consensus-based ethos of BRICS. Brazil's BRICS Sherpa, Ambassador Maurício Lyrio, framed BRICS as having a dual vocation: the defence of multilateralism and the reform of global governance. By articulating this dual role through a coherent political narrative, Brazil's presidency aimed to consolidate BRICS not only as a forum for dialogue but also as a platform for convergent and concrete action.

For Lyrio, its internal diversity was not a liability but a source of strength – its cohesion derived less from institutional uniformity than from a shared normative commitment to development, South–South cooperation and the transformation of global governance structures.³¹ The expansion criteria established in Johannesburg exemplified this approach by prioritising shared values over institutional conformity as the basis for membership.

With no centralised repository for agreements, declarations or working documents – and with presidential websites often disappearing after each term – continuity has suffered

Another challenge Brazil highlighted was the lack of institutional memory. With no centralised repository for agreements, declarations or working documents – and with

31 Maurício Lyrio, "O Brasil Aposta no Diálogo, no Consenso e na Força do Sul Global Como Motores de Transformação Positiva da Ordem Internacional" [Brazil Stakes on Dialogue, Consensus and the Strength of the Global South as Drivers of Positive Transformation of the International Order], *CEBRI-Revista* 13, January–March 2025.

presidential websites often disappearing after each term, as in India's 2021 and South Africa's 2023 presidencies – continuity has suffered. This fragmentation hinders both internal coordination and public accountability.

Brazil's proposals for a common BRICS database directly addressed these institutional weaknesses. The scale of the documentation problem is illustrated by the terms of reference, which, despite being widely cited in official BRICS documents, remain classified and therefore unavailable to the public. Such accessibility challenges extend beyond transparency: individuals from new member states informally shared similar concerns about document access during this research, revealing that these barriers affect not only decision-makers but also citizens.

The implications extend beyond mere inconvenience. Without reliable access to institutional records, tracking what was decided, when and how becomes increasingly difficult. This creates not only transparency deficits but also practical hindrances to members' ability to contribute meaningfully to ongoing decisions and monitor the implementation of previous commitments. This challenge is particularly acute for new members, who face steep learning curves in understanding internal processes. It is comparable to the experience of non-permanent members of the UNSC, where the absence of a written institutional memory forces delegations to spend much of their mandates deciphering procedures instead of advancing substantive priorities. Ironically, BRICS has criticised such inefficiencies at the UNSC while grappling with similar shortcomings.

While BRICS has no formal monitoring and evaluation system in place across its cooperation mechanisms, there are relevant precedents that could be adapted. The BRICS Think Tanks Council has proposed 'BRICS Cooperation Progress Indicators' and closer cooperation between national statistical agencies to support evaluation, although these remain voluntary and fragmented.³² By contrast, the NDB operates an Independent Evaluation Office with a clear mandate to assess the relevance, effectiveness and impact of its operations, providing a structured form of internal accountability absent in the broader BRICS framework. Establishing a comparable monitoring and evaluation function within BRICS could strengthen institutional memory, improve implementation tracking and integrate the growing number of cooperation mechanisms. Such an approach would move BRICS beyond increasingly lengthy communiqués towards demonstrable and measurable outcomes.

Yet, the Rio Declaration made it clear that the limits of what could be achieved were evident. Rather than endorsing the proposed Task Force, it cautiously acknowledged ongoing efforts to revise the terms of reference and encouraged future presidencies to continue the work.³³ This diplomatic language signalled ambivalence among some members, who were wary of deeper institutionalisation so soon after expansion.

32 BRICS Think Tanks Council, *Recommendations of the 12th BRICS Academic Forum to the Leaders: BRICS New Vision for a Better World* (BRICS, 2020), 1.

33 BRICS, "Rio de Janeiro Declaration".

The only concrete step forward was support for developing a shared document repository: an essential technical fix, but far from the procedural streamlining Brazil had envisioned. The declaration's emphasis on refining rather than restructuring places this outcome within the third category of decision-making identified earlier, where members agree on incremental procedural improvements while avoiding deeper structural change.

Charting a path forward: Priorities for future BRICS development

Brazil succeeded in diagnosing structural problems and placing institutional development on the table. But translating diagnosis into reform proved difficult in a bloc where members differ not only in priorities but also in their visions of what BRICS should become. Future presidencies will inherit both the ongoing terms of reference revision process and the broader challenge of balancing institutional effectiveness with its consensus-driven ethos.

Brazil succeeded in diagnosing structural problems and placing institutional development on the table. But translating diagnosis into reform proved difficult

Although Brazil's presidency is still ongoing, the language of the Rio Declaration suggests that no bold new institutional announcements are likely in the immediate term, as additional time will be needed to negotiate consensus. The issue was neither removed from the agenda nor diluted. Despite its limitations, it provides direction for continuing discussions on institutionalisation.

Yet, the process has illuminated the structural constraints BRICS faces and clarified several areas where future development is both necessary and feasible. The institutional challenges revealed throughout Brazil's term, particularly those linked to managing a larger and more heterogeneous membership, have offered valuable diagnostic insights. These include persistent coordination deficits, unclear mandates and the growing strain on informal mechanisms as the bloc tries to operate at scale.

As the terms of reference undergo revision and India prepares to assume the presidency in 2026, BRICS faces a pivotal moment in its institutional development. The challenge ahead is not one of wholesale institutional redesign, but rather the careful translation of Brazil's agenda-setting initiatives into measures that enhance the group's operational effectiveness while preserving its consensus-based character.

The real challenge extends beyond mere procedural adjustments. What BRICS needs is a more coherent vision of how effective coordination can function within an informal coalition that continues to expand and diversify its membership. This means grappling with fundamental questions about how to maintain the flexibility that has defined BRICS while building the institutional capacity necessary for meaningful collective action. The success of this balancing act will largely determine whether the group evolves from ad hoc arrangements into a sustainable framework for multilateral cooperation.

What BRICS needs is a more coherent vision of how effective coordination can function within an informal coalition that continues to expand and diversify its membership

The challenge, then, is to identify specific reform areas where steady, incremental progress can deliver tangible benefits without undermining the horizontal, non-hierarchical approach that defines the distinctive character of BRICS. Rather than pursuing sweeping institutional changes, the focus should be on targeted improvements that work within the group's existing ethos.

Six key areas emerge as particularly promising for this type of measured reform.

Institutional memory and knowledge management

The fragmentation of BRICS documentation across disappearing presidential websites is a fundamental impediment to institutional continuity that becomes more acute as membership expands and coordination deepens. Future presidencies should prioritise establishing the common database recognised in the Rio Declaration, incorporating summit declarations, working group outputs, memoranda of understanding and procedural guidelines within clear governance structures for maintenance and access. India's 2026 presidency, given its digital infrastructure capabilities, is well-positioned to lead this implementation while ensuring system accessibility across all member states.

Beyond documentation, there is growing interest in creating more structured Sherpa-level coordination mechanisms or rotating technical support units to address institutional drift more systematically. The BRICS Think Tanks Council is particularly well-suited to support both functions, serving as a potential repository host given its established research infrastructure while providing the analytical expertise necessary for maintaining institutional coherence across policy domains. Such arrangements would complement centralised documentation by providing procedural continuity, ensuring that institutional knowledge is not only preserved but actively maintained through regular coordination.

This dual approach, combining robust information architecture with enhanced operational coordination, could strengthen the institutional memory of BRICS without undermining its deliberately informal governance model.

Member integration and coordination frameworks

The uneven integration of new members across different mechanisms requires systematic attention. In some cases, new members are not yet participating in key working groups or are only loosely connected to initiatives. To remedy this, BRICS could develop standardised integration protocols that clarify how and when new members are brought into different mechanisms, ensuring that all 10 full members have meaningful participation opportunities while acknowledging that not every mechanism may be relevant to every country. Options include integration checklists for each mechanism, mentorship arrangements with founding members and targeted capacity-building efforts to familiarise new participants with BRICS procedures and priorities. Such frameworks would not only help ensure that expanded membership strengthens rather than dilutes the bloc's collective coherence but also reduce the risk of overburdening the rotating presidency with the task of onboarding new members.

Partner country role definition

The partner country category, while providing flexibility for broader engagement, currently operates without clearly defined parameters for participation and contribution. Future presidencies should clarify what constitutes meaningful engagement for partners, moving beyond the ad hoc approach to establish systematic guidelines for their involvement. This should include defining their role in different types of meetings, clarifying expected contributions to initiatives and outlining potential pathways for deeper engagement over time.

The partner country category, while providing flexibility for broader engagement, currently operates without clearly defined parameters for participation and contribution

Practical implementation could involve encouraging partner countries to participate as observers in various sectoral initiatives across the three pillars of cooperation. Within the finance track, partners could contribute to discussions on development finance and trade facilitation while remaining outside formal decision-making processes. Similarly, climate initiatives could benefit from partner country expertise and perspectives, particularly given the diverse geographical and developmental contexts they represent.

P2P mechanisms, such as the BRICS Academic Forum and Business Council, offer natural platforms for partner engagement, where their participation could enrich discussions without complicating consensus requirements.

Mechanism rationalisation and mandate clarification

The BRICS Think Tanks Council's mapping of nearly 200 mechanisms highlighted the need for continued systematic review of which platforms deliver value versus those that exist nominally. Rather than wholesale elimination, BRICS should develop criteria for assessing the effectiveness of its mechanisms, including output quality, member engagement levels and alignment with broader objectives. Mechanisms that consistently underperform should either be reformed with more explicit mandates or merged with more successful platforms. This process should be member-driven rather than imposed by presidencies, preserving the bottom-up nature of BRICS coordination, while introducing light-touch oversight that ensures mechanisms serve a demonstrable function rather than existing merely nominally.

Enhanced presidency transition processes

The administrative strain on Brazil, amid competing international obligations, demonstrated the fragility of presidential transitions under current arrangements. The lack of standardised handover procedures impedes continuity and creates knowledge gaps that each presidency must independently resolve. Establishing a set of transition protocols – such as formalised briefings, shared planning documents and overlapping preparation periods – would help preserve strategic momentum between presidencies. Such measures need not introduce bureaucratisation. Instead, they can serve as soft infrastructure that supports the rotating model, enabling smoother coordination across presidencies. The potential for a lightweight Troika system, inspired by the G20 model, could also be explored to ensure alignment across presidencies.

External representation and voice coordination

The bloc's growing engagement with external organisations creates opportunities for enhanced influence but also increases the risk of uncoordinated or contradictory messaging. Brazil's presidency had to navigate this emerging challenge with limited tools. While formal common positions may remain elusive, informal coordination mechanisms could at least ensure that members are aware of one another's stances in bodies such as UNESCO, the International Labour Organization or the Financial Action Task Force. This could be achieved through shared briefs or informal consultations before major global forums. Such steps would neither constrain national positions nor require formal alignment, but they would enhance the visibility and coherence of BRICS on the global stage.

Consensus-building innovation

Reaching consensus among 10 increasingly diverse members will continue to be a structural challenge. Brazil's presidency demonstrated the difficulty of securing agreement on even modest institutional steps. To avoid paralysis, BRICS should explore flexible, differentiated approaches that preserve the principle of equality while allowing progress among willing members. Variable geometry arrangements, where subsets of members advance initiatives with the option for others to join later, offer one potential path forward. This approach echoes recent reflections by former IMF executive director and former NDB vice-president Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr. He argues that differentiated participation models may be essential for the bloc's functionality after expansion, enabling pragmatic progress despite growing political and economic diversity.³⁴

Reaching consensus among 10 increasingly diverse members will continue to be a structural challenge

The partner country model already demonstrates how differentiated participation can coexist with an inclusive ethos. Expanding this logic to internal decision-making could help BRICS maintain its identity while adapting to the practicalities of scale. Drawing on practices from other international organisations such as the G20, the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the AU, BRICS could also consider developing a standardised onboarding process for new members to ensure consistent integration, shared understanding of procedures and quicker adaptation to its working methods.

Conclusion

The recent expansion of BRICS has exposed long-standing structural weaknesses, magnifying the tension between its growing ambitions and the limits of consensus-based decision-making. While the bloc has extended its global reach, its core structures remain ill-prepared to manage the scale and complexity that now defines BRICS cooperation.

This policy insight examined the institutional challenges arising from expansion and assessed the prospects for meaningful reform within the constraints of its consensus-based system. Brazil's 2025 presidency brought coordination deficits into focus, but the bloc's decision-making model inherently constrains the scope and pace of institutional

³⁴ Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr., "A Cúpula Dos Brics e as Reações Destemperadas Dos EUA" [The BRICS Summit and the Intemperate Reactions of the US], *Brasil de Fato*, July 11, 2025.

change. Efforts to advance a pragmatic agenda, including revising the terms of reference, met resistance, with the Rio Declaration offering only a vague endorsement of 'ongoing efforts' and deferring substantive reform to future presidencies.

Looking ahead, policymakers must convert diagnosis into action by refining internal processes, clarifying roles across expanding formats and investing in the operational infrastructure needed to manage a diverse membership. While institutional modesty may be a defining feature of BRICS, it cannot be a substitute for the coherence required for effective collaboration.

If BRICS is to fulfil its ambition of shaping a more inclusive and multipolar global order, consolidation – not further expansion – must take priority

If BRICS is to fulfil its ambition of shaping a more inclusive and multipolar global order, consolidation – not further expansion – must take priority. Influence will depend not on rapid growth or institutional overhaul but on steady, adaptive coordination that strengthens the group's capacity to act cohesively in an increasingly fragmented world.

Authors

Thaís Dória

is a PhD candidate in Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick.

Gustavo de Carvalho

is a Senior Researcher in the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at SAIIA.

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339–2021 • Fax +27 (0)11 339–2154
www.saiia.org.za • info@saiia.org.za