

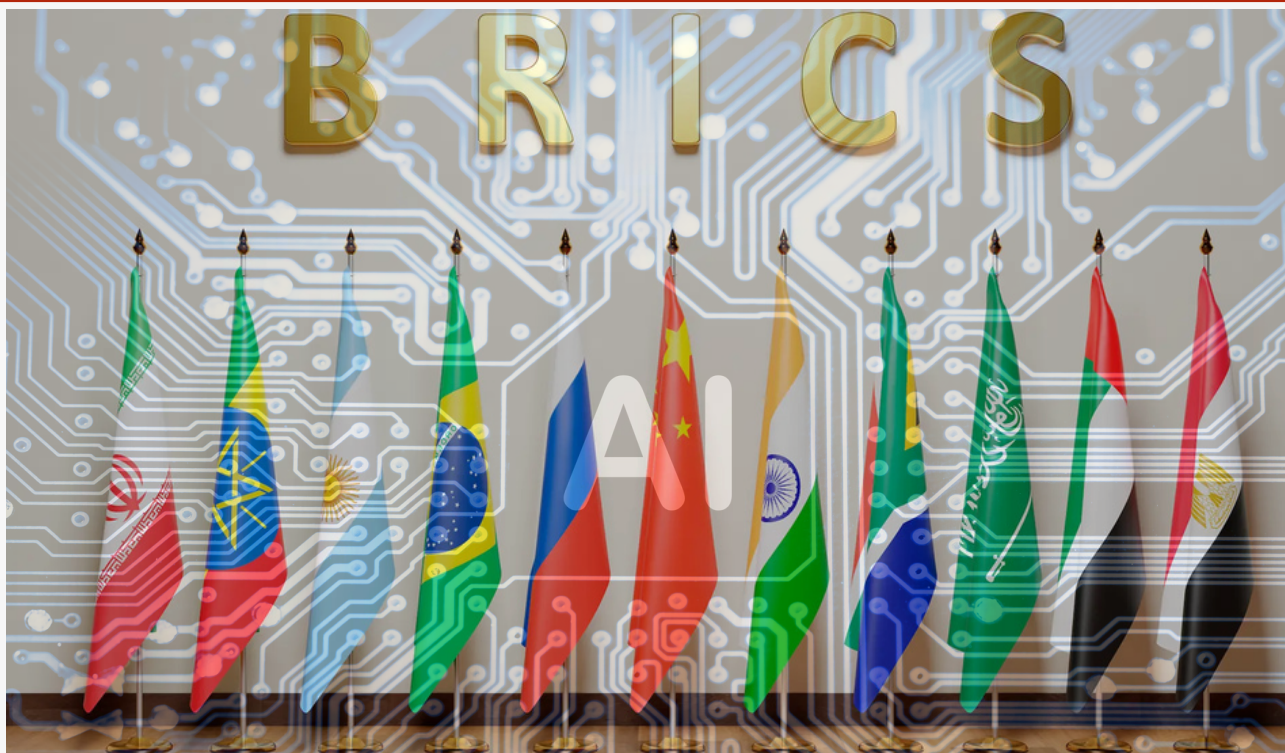


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BRICS Expansion and AI Sovereignty: Critical Reflections

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Abstract

- The 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, 2023, witnessed a significant expansion of the bloc, signalling a shift in the global geopolitical landscape.
- This expansion happens during a period when the BRICS have decided to advance Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance in innovative ways.
- This necessitates an examination of the implications for BRICS nations in the development of a cohesive framework for AI sovereignty within the expanded group.
- The expansion transforms the original "BRICS Five" into a significantly larger and more diverse bloc, enables the bloc to exercise even more influence on international relations including, crucially, the development and governance of Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- This policy brief examines the challenges and opportunities presented by this expansion, focusing specifically on the imperative of establishing a cohesive framework for AI sovereignty within the newly configured BRICS.
- In the aftermath of the 2025 BRICS Summit unfolded in Rio, Brazil, this policy brief explores this crucial intersection.



BRICS Expansion and its Implications

The inclusion of five new member states (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) in 2024 and a sixth new member in Indonesia in 2025 significantly alters the BRICS demographic, geographic reach, and economic weight. It marks the entry of West Asia/Middle Eastern and South-East Asian emerging powers into the bloc, bringing a lot of wealth, worth and other new dynamics to the group. African representation has increased, too. This expansion presents both opportunities and challenges:

- **Opportunities:** Increased economic clout, diversified resources, expanded markets, and enhanced geopolitical influence. The inclusion of oil-rich and technologically advanced nations strengthens the BRICS position in the global energy and technology sectors.
- **Challenges:** Differing levels of economic development, diverse political systems, divergent positions on relations with the West, and potential internal conflicts necessitate a robust framework for cooperation and conflict resolution. Harmonising policies and establishing common goals across such a diverse group will be crucial.

This challenges the BRICS to refine its strategic calculus, mechanisms for managing internal cohesion, intra-BRICS cooperation and its messaging on the world. The focus on shared concerns and interests based on consensus decision-making is how the BRICS have managed its challenges in the past. This should work now too.

AI Sovereignty in the Expanded BRICS

AI is rapidly transforming global economies and societies, yet its development and deployment are often unevenly distributed, raising concerns about technological dominance and digital colonialism. For some time now, the BRICS want AI development to ensure inclusive access, ethical considerations, and contribute to sustainable development. They advocate a global AI governance framework that is inclusive, representative, respects the principles of sovereignty, the right to development, and ethical responsibility. They have long decided to develop interoperable standards and protocols for AI development, based on inclusive, transparent, and consensus-based processes. They commit to an equitable digital environment with emphasis on digital literacy and expanded open-access public data infrastructure. A developmental outlook to AI governance, for the BRICS, means ensuring that advances in AI contribute meaningfully to sustainable development by enabling greater access to education and health, for instance; enhancing decarbonisation of energy systems to ensure energy equity; enhance early warning systems to mitigate natural disasters like droughts and floods; and enabling governance innovation to enhance the delivery of public goods. True to the orientation of BRICS, it advocates for inclusive international cooperation and fair exchanges in technology and expertise to ensure equitable development of AI and responsible governance of the technological innovation.

A collaborative approach to AI sovereignty within the expanded BRICS framework is critical:

- **Promoting Inclusive AI Development:** The expanded BRICS should prioritize the development of AI technologies that benefit all member states, promoting capacity building and knowledge sharing among nations with varying levels of technological advancement. This necessitates targeted investments in education, research, and infrastructure.

- **Data Governance and Privacy:** Harmonising data governance frameworks and establishing robust data privacy protections are paramount. A collaborative effort to develop ethical guidelines and regulations for AI development and deployment can help prevent misuse and ensure responsible innovation.
- **Addressing Algorithmic Bias:** AI algorithms are often trained on biased data, leading to discriminatory outcomes. The expanded BRICS should collaborate to develop mechanisms for identifying and mitigating algorithmic bias, ensuring fairness and equity in AI applications.
- **Securing Critical AI Infrastructure:** Protecting critical AI infrastructure from cyberattacks and foreign interference is crucial. This requires collective investment in cybersecurity capabilities and the development of robust national security strategies.
- **International Cooperation:** The expanded BRICS should actively engage in international discussions on AI governance, advocating for a multi-stakeholder approach that includes governments, industry, academia, and civil society. This participation will help shape global AI norms and regulations that reflect the interests of the developing world.

Policy Recommendations for the 2025 BRICS Summit

1. Policy Recommendation One: Establish a BRICS AI Task Force

A dedicated task force should be created to develop a comprehensive strategy for AI sovereignty, focusing on collaboration, capacity building, and ethical guidelines. This operational plan provides a framework. Strong leadership and commitment from all participating nations will be essential for the Task Force's success.

Operationalizing this policy recommendation to establish a BRICS AI Task Force requires a multi-phased approach encompassing several key steps:

Phase 1: Establishment and Mandate (0-6 months)

Formal Proposal and Endorsement: A formal proposal outlining the Task Force's structure, mandate, and operational plan needs to be drafted and presented to the BRICS leadership (Heads of State/Government or designated representatives). This proposal should highlight the urgency of addressing AI sovereignty in the context of the expanded BRICS membership. Endorsement from the highest levels is crucial for securing necessary resources and political support.

Composition and Selection: The Task Force should comprise experts from various fields (AI researchers, policymakers, ethicists, legal experts, cybersecurity professionals, representatives from the private sector, and civil society) from each BRICS member state. A transparent and merit-based selection process, possibly involving open nominations and peer review, would ensure expertise and representation. Consideration should be given to gender balance and geographic diversity within the task force.

Defined Mandate and Scope: The Task Force's mandate needs clear, measurable objectives and a defined timeline. This should include specific deliverables such as a draft BRICS AI strategy, ethical guidelines, capacity-building programs, and recommendations for international cooperation. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should be established to track progress.

Resource Allocation: Secure funding for the Task Force's operations, including staff, travel, research, and communication. This could involve contributions from each member state, potential funding from international organizations, or a combination of both.

Phase 2: Strategy Development and Implementation (6-24 months)

Initial Meetings and Consultations: Organise regular meetings (in-person and virtual) for the Task Force to discuss objectives, share information, and develop working documents. Engage in extensive consultations with relevant stakeholders within each member state to gather diverse perspectives.

Research and Analysis: Conduct thorough research on existing AI strategies, ethical guidelines, and regulatory frameworks globally. Analyse the specific needs and challenges of each BRICS member state concerning AI development and deployment

Drafting of a BRICS AI Strategy: Based on research and consultations, draft a comprehensive strategy for BRICS AI sovereignty. This strategy should address issues such as AI development, data governance, ethical guidelines, capacity building, cybersecurity, and international cooperation.

Capacity Building Programs: Design and implement capacity-building programs tailored to the specific needs of each member state. This might include training programs for AI professionals, workshops on ethical AI development, and support for the development of national AI strategies.

Development of Ethical Guidelines: Develop a set of ethical guidelines for the responsible development and deployment of AI within the BRICS context. These guidelines should address issues such as bias, transparency, accountability, and human rights.

Phase 3: Review, Dissemination, and Follow-up (24+ months)

Review and Refinement: Once the draft BRICS AI strategy and ethical guidelines are complete, circulate them among member states for review and feedback. Incorporate comments and suggestions to finalise the documents.

Dissemination and Advocacy: Publicly release the finalised BRICS AI strategy and ethical guidelines to promote transparency and encourage wider adoption. Advocate for the implementation of the strategy at national and international levels.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the BRICS AI strategy and the effectiveness of the capacity-building programs. Regular progress reports should be submitted to the BRICS leadership.

2. Policy Recommendation Two: Invest in AI Education and Research

Prioritise investments in AI education and research programs across all member states, promoting STEM education and fostering collaboration between academic institutions. Operationalising increased investment in AI education and research within the BRICS framework requires a multi-pronged approach focusing on capacity building, collaborative research initiatives, and the creation of sustainable funding mechanisms. This involves not only direct financial investment in universities and research institutions but also the development of curricula, teacher training programs, and the establishment of collaborative research hubs across member states. A key aspect will be identifying and addressing existing disparities in access to technology and educational resources among BRICS nations, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits. This may require targeted interventions in less developed member states to build foundational Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) skills before advanced AI training can be effectively implemented.

To foster collaboration between academic institutions, the establishment of joint research projects and exchange programs is crucial. This could involve the creation of virtual research networks connecting universities across BRICS nations, facilitating the sharing of data, research findings, and expertise.

Furthermore, joint PhD programs and postdoctoral fellowships focusing on AI-related fields could be established, fostering a new generation of AI experts within the BRICS community. Regular international conferences and workshops focusing on AI research and its applications could further strengthen these collaborative networks. Incentivising knowledge transfer through open-source initiatives and the publication of research findings in accessible formats is also essential for maximising the impact of the investment.

Sustaining these investments requires the development of robust and reliable funding mechanisms. This could involve a combination of governmental funding from each BRICS nation, funding from international organisations, and potentially private sector partnerships. A dedicated BRICS AI research fund could be established to manage and allocate these resources efficiently, ensuring transparency and accountability. The fund's governance structure would need to ensure representation from all member states and incorporate mechanisms for evaluating the success of funded projects. Prioritising long-term, sustainable funding models is critical to fostering a vibrant and self-sustaining AI research ecosystem within the BRICS framework.

3. Policy Recommendation Three: Develop A Common Data Governance Framework

Collaborate to develop a common framework for data governance that balances the need for innovation with the protection of privacy and security. **Operationalising a harmonised approach to AI data governance within BRICS requires a phased strategy that acknowledges the diverse legal and regulatory landscapes of its member states.** The initial phase should focus on identifying common ground through a comparative analysis of existing national data protection laws and AI regulations. This involves creating a working group of legal experts and policymakers from each member state to analyse existing frameworks, identifying best practices and areas of convergence. This comparative analysis will serve as the foundation for drafting a set of high-level principles for BRICS AI data governance, focusing on core areas like data minimisation, purpose limitation, user consent, data security, and cross-border data transfer. These principles should be flexible enough to accommodate existing national laws while establishing a shared understanding of fundamental rights and obligations.

The second phase centres on building consensus around the high-level principles and developing more concrete guidelines. This phase requires extensive consultation and negotiation among member states to address divergent perspectives and reconcile conflicting legal frameworks. The goal is not necessarily to create a uniform legal instrument applicable across all member states but rather to establish a common set of standards and best practices that can inform national legislation and policies. This could involve the development of model laws or guidelines that member states can adapt to their specific contexts, ensuring that national sovereignty is preserved while promoting interoperability and data exchange within the BRICS framework. Mechanisms for dispute resolution and conflict management should also be established.

Finally, the third phase emphasises implementation and ongoing refinement. This involves capacity-building initiatives to assist member states in implementing the agreed-upon principles and guidelines. This could entail providing technical assistance, training programs for legal and technical professionals, and the development of tools and resources to support data governance practices. A crucial aspect of this phase is the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track progress, identify challenges, and ensure that the BRICS AI data governance framework continues to adapt to evolving technological advancements and

societal needs. This continuous process of adaptation and refinement is crucial for ensuring the framework's long-term effectiveness and relevance.

4. Policy Recommendation Four: Foster South-South Cooperation

Strengthen partnerships among BRICS nations to share best practices, technologies, and resources related to AI development. This collaboration is crucial to enable the BRICS to achieve faster what it has set out to do. This is a heritage of decades of south-south cooperation dating back to the Africa-Asia Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, where the principles of cooperation and solidarity among developing countries were agreed. These include collective self-reliance to reduce the dependency of countries of the South on countries of the North. Another is working on the basis of shared aspirations while recognising shared histories among them. In this case, the aspiration towards inclusive, representative and sovereign futures joins them together. This is not cooperation against the West, with good reasons to do so, but it is cooperation in favour of advancing the global south.

This cooperation is best expressed by strengthening the shared implementation of the BRICS decisions in the past decade and a half. It is about strengthening internal accountability and responsibility. It is about growing actual levels of trade, investment and cooperation among BRICS countries individually, on bilateral, trilateral and multilateral basis. The BRICS need a mutual accountability mechanism by which they should hold each other to account for the implementation or non-implementation of mutually agreed decisions, especially related to economic and financial cooperation in the first place and other areas of cooperation.

5. Policy Recommendation Five: Engage In Multilateral AI Governance

Actively participate in international discussions on AI governance, advocating for a multi-stakeholder approach that reflects the interests of the developing world. Operationalising active participation in multilateral AI governance requires a multi-pronged strategy for BRICS.

First, BRICS nations should establish a unified negotiating bloc within existing international forums like the OECD, G20, and UN bodies addressing AI. This requires coordinating national positions on key AI governance issues, such as algorithmic accountability, data privacy, and the ethical implications of AI development. A dedicated BRICS working group focused on international AI cooperation, composed of experts in AI ethics, law, and technology policy, is crucial for developing cohesive negotiating strategies and ensuring a consistent voice representing the diverse interests within the BRICS membership. This coordination necessitates transparent information sharing and regular consultations among member states, allowing for the development of common positions before engaging in international negotiations.

Second, BRICS should proactively shape the global AI governance agenda by proposing concrete initiatives and frameworks. This includes advocating for principles of inclusivity and equity, ensuring that AI development and deployment benefit all nations, not just the technologically advanced ones. BRICS could propose the creation of a new international body dedicated to AI governance that incorporates the perspectives of developing nations or push for significant reform within existing organisations to increase representation and decision-making power for developing world voices. Furthermore, focusing on capacity building initiatives in AI governance for developing countries aligns with the multipolar world vision and increases their participation in the global AI landscape. BRICS could offer training programs, technical

assistance, and shared resources to help developing countries build their capacity to navigate the complex challenges of AI governance.

Third, fostering a multi-stakeholder approach is critical. BRICS should actively engage with civil society organisations, industry representatives, and academic institutions in their AI governance efforts, ensuring that diverse perspectives are incorporated into the development of policies and frameworks. This will facilitate a more inclusive and representative approach to AI governance that is responsive to the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. Collaborating with like-minded countries and regional organisations outside the BRICS framework, based on shared values, would further amplify the BRICS voice and contribute to a more equitable and balanced multipolar world order in AI governance. This strategy of multilateral engagement, emphasizing cooperation and a balanced multi-stakeholder approach, will promote a more representative global AI governance landscape, better reflecting the interests of developing countries and furthering the goal of a multipolar world.

Conclusion

The expansion of BRICS presents a significant opportunity to reshape the global order and promote a more equitable and inclusive approach to technological advancement. By prioritizing AI sovereignty and developing a collaborative framework for AI governance, the expanded BRICS can play a leading role in shaping the future of AI and ensuring its benefits are shared globally. The 2025 BRICS Summit in Rio should serve as a pivotal moment for solidifying this commitment and laying the groundwork for a future where AI serves humanity's collective interests.

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