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BRAZIL

BRICS Wants to Shape Global AI Governance, Too

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Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Chinese President Xi Jinping, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pose for a photo at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, Aug. 22, 2023. (Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service photo via AP Images).



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The BRICS group has long sought to challenge Western domination of technologies and infrastructures. Some of its proposed initiatives, such as laying an undersea communications cable that would bypass the U.S. and Europe, and reported discussions, like the idea of creating its own [internet](#), have not materialized. But the group's technological ambitions have gained traction in other areas, including [cooperation](#) on satellite data exchange and the digitalization of commercial and financial services.

Today, cooperation on artificial intelligence is increasingly on its radar, and Russia has made the promotion of cooperation in science and advanced technology a [priority](#) issue during its rotating presidency of the group this year. [Could this signal the dawn of a new era in which the BRICS group, already aspiring to collective leadership in global governance, asserts itself as a transformative force in the global AI landscape?](#) Provided the group aligns its members' approaches to AI through its new initiatives, its role in international AI governance is poised to expand, with several emerging trends warranting attention.

Evolution of AI Cooperation Among the BRICS

The BRICS group has evolved as a strategic partnership of emerging economies that seeks to coordinate policies on

major global challenges and spearhead reforms in international affairs. Originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China, the group formally expanded its membership in 2011 to include South Africa and again in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and potentially Saudi Arabia.

The BRICS group set the stage for AI cooperation in its 2015 Memorandum of Understanding in Science, Technology and Innovation, identifying information and communications technology, or ICT, as a key area of cooperation. The BRICS leaders' joint declaration explicitly referred to AI for the first time in 2017, depicting it as an ICT policy area in which BRICS should enhance collaboration.

The BRICS have collectively sought to develop their AI policies and advance members' AI capabilities. Nonetheless, barriers to collective action remain significant.

Since then, AI has been increasingly discussed at the group's ministerial meetings for agriculture, communications, education, environment, foreign affairs, science and technology, and trade. An analysis of declarations from leaders' summits and ministerial meetings indicates that the BRICS predominantly view AI instrumentally and positively, considering it a catalyst for economic growth, development, technological progress and inclusive societies. Expressions of collaboration and progress often appear as crucial elements of the BRICS' AI statements.

Thus it is unsurprising that the BRICS countries went a step further in August 2023, founding an AI Study Group to "jointly fend off risks, and develop AI governance frameworks and standards." This suggests that the group increasingly views AI as a separate area of focus and will dedicate resources accordingly.

The Global Context and AI Governance

While diplomatic negotiations are inherently complex, governing AI at the international level introduces unique challenges. For one thing, U.S. sanctions to prevent China from harnessing AI for military ends now coincide with economic sanctions against Russia for invading Ukraine. The former have at times created divisions among U.S. allies, while geopolitical competition more broadly has resulted in tensions between the U.S. and the BRICS, limiting the bargaining space and possible negotiation outcomes.

Private sector engagement further complicates regulatory processes for AI. While discussions must involve tech giants to ensure that proposals align with the dynamic AI landscape, they cannot allow tech companies' self-interest to steer regulatory outcomes. Striking this balance is difficult given governments' reliance on private sector collaboration for insights into AI risks and the lack of civil society involvement in AI discussions.

Finally, it is also unclear where and how AI technologies should be regulated. This is reflected in a surge of international discussions about AI. For instance, the United Nations General Assembly just adopted a landmark resolution on the promotion of "safe, secure and trustworthy" AI systems, and the Security Council has discussed how to regulate generative AI. Similarly, the International Telecommunications Union's AI for Good summits have sought to align AI use with the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals since 2017. Other efforts focus on establishing ethical principles, as in the G-20's call for "human-centered AI" and the OECD's for advancing "innovative and trustworthy [AI] that respects human rights and democratic values."

While addressing AI risks without limiting innovation appears to be a shared goal in all these efforts, whether that can be achieved through binding regulation, such as the European Union's recent AI Act, remains to be seen.

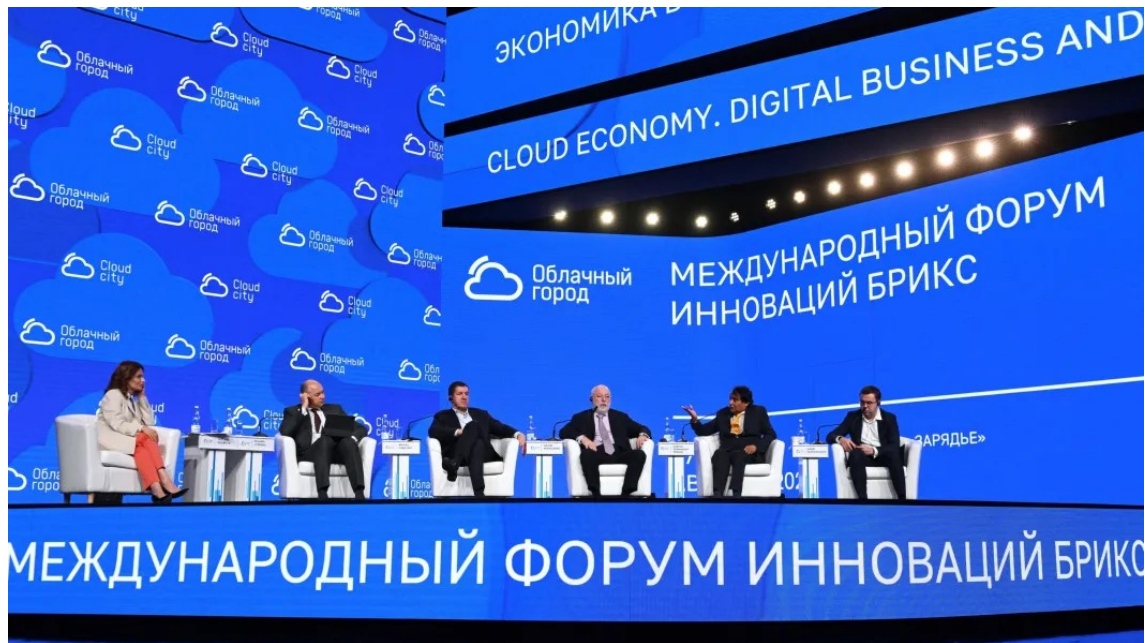
Potential for BRICS Leadership

Finding feasible governance paths in this intricate landscape necessitates strong leadership. If the BRICS group hopes to provide such leadership in international AI governance debates, it must speak with one voice, engage in agenda-setting and make sure proposals reflect the group's mission of advancing the interests of developing economies. Can the group rise to this challenge?

The BRICS have collectively sought to develop their AI policies and advance members' AI capabilities. This is evident not just in the creation of the BRICS AI Study Group but also in the creation of a Digital Economy Working Group and in commitments to develop "digital education cooperative mechanisms" made at the 2023 BRICS Summit. The general broadening and deepening of technological cooperation should reinforce BRICS cooperation on AI specifically.

The BRICS-led New Development Bank, or NDB, is also investing in AI applications in BRICS countries, such as "smart metro development" in China, and using AI to improve its own institutional practices. With the current expansion of the BRICS group as well as greater interest in expanding the NDB, the potential for BRICS-led

investments and cooperation will increase. Bilateral investment in AI among the BRICS countries, such as the \$1 billion [Russia-China Technology Investment Fund](#) established in 2021, may increase as well.



Panelists attend a plenary session at the BRICS International Innovation Forum, in Moscow, Russia, Aug. 28, 2023 (Sputnik photo by Kirill Zykov via AP Images).

Nonetheless, barriers to collective action remain significant. Chinese President Xi Jinping has [stated](#) the new AI Study Group will “develop AI governance frameworks and standards with broad-based consensus” while enhancing technological cooperation within the BRICS group. This implies a push for binding standards and reflects China’s own [preference for binding rules](#).

But the BRICS countries’ [diverse approaches to AI regulation](#) at the national level are difficult to align. Following BRICS expansion in 2024, achieving consensus also now requires policy alignment among 10, rather than five, members. BRICS’ internal dynamics—such as tensions between India and China, which led to India [blocking](#) 138 digital apps originating in China for national security reasons in 2020—further undermine the prospects for developing group-level action on AI.

Even if the BRICS countries can act as one, there is a broader question regarding the group’s agenda-setting power at the global level. Debates about the BRICS’ rise often question whether the group [can create](#) an alternative system of governance with its own set of regulatory practices at all.

Time will tell whether a BRICS AI agenda can gain traction in global policymaking. In the global arena, the BRICS must not only compete with governments seeking to advance their own security and economic interests but also with tech corporations that often dominate multistakeholder initiatives, potentially sidelining issues of interests to the BRICS and/or developing economies. Geopolitical tensions between the West on one side and China and Russia on the other could also reinforce difficulties in advancing a BRICS AI agenda. And the multitude of venues for discussing AI regulations raises another question: Which agenda should the group aim to shape?

BRICS’ efforts at crafting international AI governance not only serve as a litmus test for its own future role in international relations, but also reflect how AI is transforming the international governance landscape.

According to the [OECD Policy Observatory](#), national governance frameworks are “predominantly being developed in China, the EU and North America (46%), compared to just 5.7% in Latin America and 2.4% in Africa.” International AI dialogues mostly occur in forums such as the G-7, OECD and Global Partnership for AI, which include some BRICS members but exclude the rest of the Global South.

[The legitimacy](#) of any future international AI regulation will depend on the inclusion of a geographically and

economically diverse group of countries, and the BRICS can play an important role in expanding the debate and integrating more diverse perspectives. For instance, the BRICS group could coordinate ongoing regional discussions of shared AI preferences in [South Asia](#) and [Africa](#) to establish a set of shared positions or guiding principles. Such a platform could pay more attention to AI's impact on labor and financial markets and to cooperative measures for AI capacity-building.

Yet whether the BRICS countries are willing to engage in technology-sharing and tech transfers among themselves, much less with the broader Global South, remains uncertain and will depend on how BRICS member states address future [domestic challenges](#).

Trends to Watch in 2024

To be sure, there is no guarantee that the BRICS' institutional development will be smooth, nor that global AI governance is feasible or even desirable. The rapid pace of AI development contrasts with the slow pace of multilateral diplomacy, and both climate and trade multilateralism demonstrate the governance challenges accompanying a "[spaghetti bowl](#)" of regulations. Simultaneously, the BRICS now operates in an expanded format, making it more difficult for AI champions within the group to lead as their ability to set the agenda decreases and consensus-building becomes more complicated.

Yet the need for AI governance remains, and actors wishing to shape those efforts must be proactive, not reactive, to be successful at the international level. That will require crafting a coherent AI agenda and fostering partnerships that propel its realization. As a coalition of rising powers, the BRICS embody the transition from norm-taking to norm-making. Their efforts at crafting international AI governance can thus not only serve as a litmus test for their own future role in international relations, but also reflect how AI is transforming the international governance landscape.

In this context, three trends bear watching in 2024.

BRICS cooperation across existing AI fora. Will the group's interest in AI translate into greater collective engagement in ongoing AI governance discussions? While BRICS' AI experts are already [engaging with the ITU](#), cooperation may also emerge in other bodies where AI is discussed that already have strong relations with the BRICS. The [U.N. Summit of the Future](#) in September 2024, which seeks to enhance cooperation on critical policy challenges and address gaps in global governance, may become a forcing event accelerating BRICS initiatives in the AI realm. Not only have the BRICS countries sought to increase their status in the U.N., but AI is already on the agenda there and presents an opportunity for coalitional behavior.

The impact of BRICS expansion on the group's AI agenda. The UAE and Saudi Arabia could potentially [emerge as additional AI champions](#) within the group, given their [prioritization of AI in economic development strategies](#). While discussing an ethical framework for AI [is on Russia's BRICS agenda](#) for 2024, it is unclear whether new member states—or core BRICS states—will agree to joint [ethical guidelines](#) in their own use of AI. Not doing so could damage the BRICS' capacity to push for a shared AI agenda in ethically charged international governance settings. How BRICS expansion affects private sector engagement in AI discussions will also be worth following, to see if the group's expansion leads to more interaction among BRICS business platforms and a broader cooperation with AI industry representatives from the West and the Rest.

The further institutionalization of AI cooperation among the BRICS. While the creation of the AI Joint Study Group was a crucial step toward institutionalizing BRICS cooperation on AI, recent reports suggest BRICS members—and China in particular—may be pushing for more formalized collaboration. In January 2024, Beijing called for a "[BRICS AI Development Cooperation](#)" center to be established in China. One month later, Chinese researchers released the [AI Governance International Evaluation Index](#), evaluating the BRICS' AI development level, governance tools and governance effectiveness vis-à-vis G-7 countries. This implies an interest in establishing the position of the group, rather than that of individual members, as a dialogue partner in global AI governance.

More cooperation across existing AI fora, a more diffuse AI collaboration arising from BRICS expansion and additional institutionalization of AI cooperation among the BRICS would all speak for the group's potential to push AI governance forward at the global level. As the U.N. Summit for the Future approaches in September 2024, the BRICS need to define—and communicate—how their engagement with AI can help improve governance in a policy area that is likely to be central to global policymaking in the coming years.

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(*European Journal of International Relations*, 2023) and "Can BRICS De-dollarize the Global Financial System?" (*CUP Elements*, 2022).

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