

What is the significance for Russia of the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan?

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Executive summary

For Russia, the key takeaway from the BRICS Summit is the optics, as Putin's interactions counter claims of isolation. High-profile moments, like his embrace with India's Modi, grabbed attention, though the absence of leaders like Brazil's raised questions. Domestically, hosting the Summit in Kazan boosts Tatarstan's profile, showcasing a multicultural image of the Russian Federation. The foreign guests overlooked authoritarian security measures such as a temporary internet shutdown.

Russia aims to turn BRICS into an anti-Western force but faces both challenges and an increasingly evident lack of intrinsic attractiveness. It is chiefly as China's sidekick that Russia is attracting real interest. While Russia and China push aggressive goals, key members like Brazil and India focus on economic cooperation, not confrontation. New members, such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), complicate Moscow's agenda further with their Western ties. There is no consensus within BRICS about whether the grouping is "non-West or "anti-West".

Economically, Russia seeks to challenge the US dollar and Western institutions to weaken the impact of sanctions but faces barriers like limited currency convertibility and capital movement. The BRICS Development Bank's decision to freeze Russia's transactions post-Ukraine invasion highlights these limitations.

The Summit's final declaration emphasized the Middle East over Russia's war against Ukraine and the weak language adopted made clear that Russia's aggressive policies do not have the backing of the BRICS collective.

Introduction

Russia hosted the 16th BRICS Summit from October 22-24, in the Tatarstan capital of Kazan. Originally named for its founding members – Brazil, Russia, India, China (with South Africa joining later) – the grouping has expanded since last year's Summit to officially include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with Saudi Arabia participating but not as an official member. A significant diplomatic success for Russia, the Summit included both members and non-members, totalling over 35 participating states and more than 20 heads of state, including, for the first time, a NATO member, Türkiye, as well as [UN Secretary-General António Guterres](#).

While BRICS is not a formal organization – it lacks a foundational treaty, a secretariat, and funds of its own – it has proven its resilience and growing relevance over its 15-year existence, despite Western predictions of its downfall due to internal differences. A 'Global South' and Russian-Chinese-led alternative to the G7, BRICS represents about 45 % of the world's population (compared to the G7's 10 %), 35 % of world GDP (PPP-adjusted, compared to the G7's 30 %), and 45 % of global oil production. Over 40 countries have recently expressed interest in joining, according to the current Russian Presidency.

Beginning in 2006 as a Wall Street idea and then Russia-led initiative, BRICS has primarily focused on economic collaboration, allowing members to coordinate agendas and policies, improve cooperation, and get significant face time with one other, especially with China, which represents more than half of the grouping's GDP. Since then, BRICS has established its own New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), meant to parallel the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), respectively. It has also formed numerous working groups and committees on various levels and issues. This progression has allowed BRICS, in line with Russia's strategic goals, to move towards becoming a joint international voice, with shared language and positions on political issues.

What is the purpose of the Kazan Summit from Russia's perspective?

The gathering of so many international leaders alongside Putin serves as a message in itself. Every handshake in front of the cameras demonstrated that Russia is neither isolated nor a pariah. From this standpoint, what was decided is of lesser importance to Putin. The embrace between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Putin has already gone viral and sparked discussion. The very fact that UN Secretary-General António Guterres was in Russia was a win for Russian propaganda, which declared that "Russia was the centre of the world" this week. With little else to report at the outset, newspapers were quick to quote South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who described Russia as an ally and a "valued friend who supported us right from the beginning, from the days of our struggle against apartheid." This all fits seamlessly with the aims of the Russian host.

The flip side of this focus from a Russian point of view is that it also drew attention to those who did not show up. Did the Brazilian President really slip in the bath and was advised by doctors not to fly? Notably, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is remaining at home to

welcome the president of Poland, delegations from Greece and the EU, citing scheduling conflicts.

As Russia turns its gaze south and east, it requires a city like Kazan to project itself outward. Had the meeting taken place in Moscow, attendees would have encountered a city where around two million Muslims struggle to share a handful of mosques, and where the aftermath of a terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall earlier this year has resulted in raids and deportations of labour migrants from Central Asia. Not to mention attempts to force migrants to sign contracts to fight on the Ukrainian front with threats of trumped-up charges. Much of the public discourse in Moscow is marred by prejudice and overt racism towards non-whites, particularly Central Asian Muslims. This is not conducive to Russia's ambitions of taking a leading role in an anti-Western coalition. Kazan, on the other hand, presents a much better image – a city with a balanced population of Muslims and non-Muslims, noted for its relative prosperity and picturesque city centre, showcasing the multicultural and multilingual facets of the Russian Federation.

The Summit as a symbolic touchstone for power balancing within Russia

The BRICS Summit has also been a significant PR boost for the federal subject of Tatarstan and its leader, Rustam Minnikhanov, who until recently styled himself as president of the Republic of Tatarstan. In a humiliating turn for a region proud of its historic roots and relative autonomy, he was compelled to relinquish the title after it was decreed that only one individual in the Russian Federation could hold presidential office. In a bid likely to placate local elites, it was Mr Minnikhanov who welcomed world leaders at the airport red carpet with the traditional Tatar delicacy, chak-chak. Meanwhile, Putin held court in Kazan's historic Kremlin, a complex established by Tsar Ivan the Fourth – usually referred to as the Terrible – on the ruins of the last independent Muslim Khan of Kazan's former residence.

Russia's growing centralisation is not without its controversies and necessitates a careful balancing act from Vladimir Putin, who speaks of a 'great and diverse country' on one hand and of a 'Russian world' where Russian culture and language have unequivocal superiority on the other. Bringing world leaders to Kazan should be seen as a carefully orchestrated move, not just in terms of international optics, but also in the domestic context.

As for the residents of Kazan, they have largely expressed their frustrations about a city that has been locked down. Students have been turfed out of their dorms and left to fend for themselves to make way for visitors, with no alternative accommodation provided. Moreover, the city has experienced an internet blackout and disruptions to mobile and data services. [Similar internet disruptions](#) have been reported during both political protests and other high-level meetings attended by Putin. The Russian state has become more adept at implementing temporary shutdowns of access to mobile phones and the Internet in recent years.

The Kazan Summit and Russia's economic and strategic foreign policy goals with BRICS

Beyond optics and domestic power dynamics, what are Russia's foreign policy objectives with BRICS, and did the Kazan Summit advance these aims? First, Russia seeks to transform this large, influential grouping into an anti-Western weapon to further the agenda of dismantling and replacing what it views as the Western-led liberal international order. However, while Russia and China are aligned in their anti-Western strategic objectives for BRICS, Brazil and India see the group not as a tool against anyone party but as a valuable economic and geopolitical forum for navigating an increasingly fragmented world by hedging and diversifying relations.

The inclusion of Iran strengthens the anti-West faction within BRICS; however, most other new members and invitees, such as the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia – like Brazil and India – maintain crucial Western ties and view BRICS as a platform to reform, rather than replace, the current global order, governance structures and power distribution. This central [divide](#) within BRICS is likely to persist for the time being in spite of efforts to find common ground. This challenge the group's cohesion and usefulness, especially for Russia.

Secondly, Russia aims to leverage BRICS' size and influence in its economic confrontation with the West, especially in countering sanctions. Since its inception, BRICS has strived to reduce its reliance on, and the global dominance of, the US dollar and Western-led financial institutions. This includes promoting the use of members' own currencies in trade, offering BRICS alternatives such as the NDB, [establishing](#) a cross-border payment system as a SWIFT alternative, and even exploring the long-term idea of a joint BRICS [currency](#) – the main topic at last year's BRICS Summit.

However, several obstacles hinder the feasibility of these initiatives, including limited capital mobility, currency convertibility and uneven trade relations among BRICS members. Only Russia and Iran currently face sanctions that require financial alternatives, while other members are comfortable using the dollar and SWIFT. Interestingly, the NDB [froze](#) all transactions with Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, citing “uncertainties and restrictions.”

Regarding these various issues and Russian ambitions, the joint [Kazan Declaration](#) issued by BRICS after the Summit was a typical Christmas tree of different pet topics, but had limited offering in the way of support for Russia's broader narratives. The declaration includes no overt anti-Western rhetoric, and while it criticizes sanctions (§10; §22), it also calls for reforming the international financial system, including an “adequately resourced IMF” (§11), and underscores the “key role of the G20” (§14).

Crucially, Ukraine is mentioned only once, in a brief paragraph (§36), which omits Russian talking points, instead “recall[ing] national positions”, urging all states to “act consistently with the Purposes and Principles of the UN Charter”, and highlighting “relevant” mediation efforts “aimed at a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy.” This can in no way be seen as a triumph for Russia, but at the same time Moscow had little reason to expect BRICS to back Russian narratives about its war. The gains in terms of norm-shaping that Russia can celebrate are found elsewhere.

Conclusions – how relevant is BRICS for Russia?

In light of Russia's war in Ukraine, the meeting can be seen as a PR success, offering face time with numerous decision-makers from countries wary of the global costs associated with the war against Ukraine. The final declaration places more emphasis on the Middle East than on Russia's own aggressive war in Ukraine. It expresses the BRICS countries' "serious concerns about the worsening situation and humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories due to Israel's military actions". No similar concerns are articulated regarding the victims of Russia's war; however, the neutral phrasing on Ukraine signals that Putin does not have the backing of all participants in his aggressive policies.

It's unclear whether any of the foreign visitors noticed the internet shutdown or left with a greater understanding of what kind of country Russia has become and how it treats its citizens. We in the West, along with the so-called Russian opposition in exile, face a significant challenge in communicating to the public in BRICS countries the true nature of the society that their leaders have visited and, in one way or another, endorsed.

Looking ahead, while this Summit marks a diplomatic milestone in Russia's effort to break Putin's international isolation and pariah status, Russia's attempts to use BRICS as a tool to challenge the Western-led global and financial order will continue to face significant obstacles. The fundamental rift within BRICS — between the anti-Western stance of Russia and China and the more moderate views of countries like India and Brazil — will likely continue to test the group's unity and its value to Russia's long-term objectives. Russia has limited appeal and little to offer participating countries with its current policies. For the time being, BRICS is likely to serve more as a forum for discussion and possible coordination rather than as a cohesive force for change.

Nevertheless, it will still challenge and compete with other formats, such as the G7. Thereby it provides a diplomatic and political boost to Moscow by placing Russia firmly within a large and influential global grouping, albeit as a sidekick to China. However, as indicated in the joint declaration, Russia has not gained the international support it seeks for its war or its anti-Western agenda. Ultimately, despite Moscow's close anti-Western alignment with Beijing and the open backing from Iran, within the BRICS format, Russia has so far little support for its aggressive policies, and limited opportunities to further many of its broader strategic aims.



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