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Global Futures Bulletin



THE BRICS AND THE
DECARBONIZATION
AND BIODIVERSITY
PROTECTION
CHALLENGES

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THE BRICS AND THE DECARBONIZATION AND BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION CHALLENGES

Abstract¹

The world faces an unprecedented convergence of environmental crises – climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss – that collectively threaten the planet’s ecological balance and humanity’s future. Reversing the Triple Planetary Crisis necessitates urgent and coordinated action across all sectors and countries, accelerating the transition to low-carbon economies while protecting biodiversity are key challenges for the next coming years. Countries that have joined the BRICS are increasingly an important geopolitical force in current global politics and their individual and collective action is key to the success of concerted global action. The group’s recent expansion (beyond its five founding countries) offers an opportunity to make these agendas central to the group. Combined, BRICS countries are not only biodiversity and energy rich but also contribute to a large share of greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions. At the same time, these are countries with considerable human and technological capacity to pursue decarbonization and protect biodiversity. As a group, this highly heterogeneous “mini-lateral” counter-hegemonic forum needs to be engaged on their own terms, including to bring sustainability issues to the fore and raise their ambition. Moving forward, countries in the group should rely on their own climate and biodiversity champions and innovators to move intra-BRICS cooperation forward, boost the role of their New Development Bank (NDB) in bridging climate, biodiversity, and development finance, and aim for greater policy coherence for concerted global action across these agendas.

Introduction

In 2023, the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa welcomed the entry of new members to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) family. He stated at the time that: “BRICS has embarked on a new chapter in its effort to build a world that is fair, a world that is just, a world that is also inclusive and prosperous.” Concerns with justice, fairness, and inclusivity – alongside the better representation of Southern and non-Western voices – in a reformed global governance was at the core of the group’s political project since its inception in 2009. Fifteen years later, BRICS is expanding and becoming BRICS+: with four new members joining in 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates - UAE), Indonesia joining in 2025 and Saudi Arabia finally formalizing its membership.* As the group keeps attracting new members, there continues to be a collective action gap in responding to climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss – the Triple Planetary Crisis.²

This Global Futures Bulletin considers the role played by the expanded BRICS (also known as *BRICS+*) and explores whether and how this “mini-lateral” grouping can play a role in addressing two major global challenges: accelerating decarbonization and protecting biological diversity. The discussion is framed around the opportunities and challenges facing one of the premier forums of Global South and Non-Western countries to increase their ambitions and become leading voices in these agendas. The Bulletin reflects on the interconnectedness of these agendas, not only

for BRICS countries (some of which are among the most biodiverse in the world) but also for the wider international community. Ultimately, decarbonization and biodiversity protection are relevant to the BRICS in two complementary ways: as these agendas deeply condition the political, economic, and environmental futures of all BRICS members and collectively, since the group’s concerted voice is relevant to the global response to these major contemporary challenges. Without a strong commitment by BRICS countries (individually and as a group) the world will fail to accelerate action on decarbonization and biodiversity protection.

Some methodological clarifications are necessary at the outset. First, this Bulletin is not immune to the existing asymmetries between these two important multilateral agendas: decarbonization and biodiversity protection. Some of the data and examples presented reflect the greater global focus on and concern with climate change and decarbonization over the last decade, compared to biodiversity issues. We try to compensate for that by strengthening our analysis and recommendations for BRICS countries to better engage with the intersections between these two pillars. Second, the very political future BRICS is highly dynamic and evolving. Not only the 2023 and 2024 expansions remain incomplete, with Saudi Arabia potentially joining the group in the near future, but also new countries vying for membership. Recognizing both the informal structure and the fluid nature of BRICS is important to better engage with the opportunities and challenges to ensure the forum a more progressive voice in these agendas in the coming years.

*Editorial note: After being invited to join BRICS in 2023, Saudi Arabia did not explicitly commit to a BRICS membership. Throughout 2024, the country’s final decision on the matter was uncertain. For that reason, this Bulletin has not included Saudi Arabia as a full member. For an analysis on Saudi Arabia’s case see Oliver Stuenkel and Margot Treadwell. “Why Is Saudi Arabia Hedging Its BRICS Invite?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2024.

The Triple Planetary Crisis and the role of BRICS

The world faces an unprecedented convergence of environmental crises, such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, that together threaten the planet's ecological balance and humanity's future. This Triple Planetary Crisis demands urgent and coordinated action across all sectors and countries. The BRICS nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, along with new members Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the UAE – find themselves at a pivotal crossroads in addressing this global challenge. As some of the world's largest economies and most populous nations, these countries are key stakeholders in global efforts to reduce carbon emissions and protect biodiversity.

While much of the current policy debate on carbon emissions disproportionately focuses on China – undoubtedly a central player in global decarbonization dynamics, other BRICS countries are also significant players in these agendas. Many of these nations are among the largest carbon emitters (including China, India, Russia, Brazil, Iran, and Indonesia, as shown below) and play pivotal roles in global energy markets, including the UAE. As such, their involvement is critical in accelerating the global energy transition away from fossil fuels. Moreover, Brazil, Indonesia, China, India, and South Africa rank among the most biodiverse countries globally, underscoring the interconnectedness of decarbonizing and biodiversity preservation. Both challenges require integrated solutions, particularly for mega-biodiverse countries, including those BRICS members mentioned above.

Like other nations around the world, BRICS countries face a path towards sustainable development that is laden with opportunities, challenges, tensions, and inconsistencies. However, their collective power as a group

must be reinforced and taken seriously if the international community wants to accelerate progress on the interconnected goals of biodiversity conservation and climate action. The potential for BRICS to act as a progressive driving force in these global agendas hinges on its members' willingness and ability to leverage their economic and political influence while navigating internal differences and external pressures.

From BRICS to BRICS+

The group known as BRICS (now BRICS+) represents a coalition of countries united not only by their geopolitical stature but also by a shared, albeit varied, dissatisfaction with the existing global governance structures. BRICS emerged in the late 2000s as a collective initiative by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa to advocate for reforms in multilateral institutions and to promote a more equitable, multipolar, and increasingly “post-Western”³ world order. While counterbalancing American hegemony – and unipolarity – was a shared objective among the founding members, their approaches and relationships with the United States and the Western-led International Liberal Order (ILO) have varied significantly.

Among the Southern heavyweights, countries like Brazil or South Africa have been full (albeit critical) supporters of the ILO and multilateralism.⁴ China and India, while more vocal, have pursued selective forms of revisionism, focusing on reform rather than dismantling existing global governance frameworks.⁵ Seeking recognition as “great powers,” China, India, and Brazil have generally adhered to established rules and norms, emphasizing their roles as “constructive” and “responsible” actors. In doing so, they have countered accusations of being “rogue” or “irresponsible” players, often levelled against them by established Western powers. Balancing acceptance and rejecting of existing global norms, policies, and institutions,

BRICS countries demonstrated a capacity to innovate and propose alternative solutions to common global challenges. Except for Russia, most BRICS have neither necessarily nor uniquely displayed greater reluctance than established powers to engage with complex global issues.⁶

Since its inception in the first decade of the 21st century, the BRICS grouping has operated as a flexible alliance of nations with diverse political, economic, and cultural backgrounds, united by a shared interest in reshaping global governance institutions. The member countries largely agreed on the pitfalls of a unipolar world and the deficiencies of the existing (often Western-led or Western-dominated) global regimes. Their critique encompassed issues of “input” legitimacy (procedural shortcomings) and “output” legitimacy (performance gaps),⁷ as well as perceived “double standards” and “hypocrisy” by Western powers in managing global affairs.⁸ While the group has never been the primary diplomatic platform for any of its founding members,⁹ membership has served as a relatively low-cost strategic foreign policy tool for all five countries. It remains a crucial venue for their collective advocacy for systemic change in international relations.

The inherent diversity within BRICS has shaped its *modus operandi*, characterized by consensus-based decision-making and cautious progression. This approach has ensured that all actions reflect the minimum common ground among its members, often resulting in declarations rather than robust action plans and an avoidance of sensitive issues that could provoke disagreements. Over time, BRICS has expanded its agenda, as reflected in the growing list of topics featured in its annual Summit declarations. The group has also established formal thematic working groups to facilitate sustained technical and political cooperation beyond high-level meetings.

Despite these developments, tangible cooperation has often fallen short, positioning BRICS more as a platform for dialogue (or a “talk-forum”) than a driver of concrete action. A notable exception is the New Development Bank (NDB), headquartered in Shanghai. Established in 2015 and fully operational since 2016, the NDB has begun accepting new members since 2021, including Bangladesh, Egypt, and the UAE, with Uruguay as a prospective member. While still modest in scale, the Bank demonstrates the grouping’s potential to provide alternative financial and development resources to the Global South, with a strong focus on sustainability.

An “energy rich, energy needy” group

Since the 2024 expansion, BRICS is entering a new phase and adopting a new identity as *BRICS+*. This expansion introduces fresh dynamics, offering both opportunities for enhanced cooperation among the group members and challenges stemming from their increasingly diverse political and economic backgrounds.¹⁰ Collectively, these now countries account for over one-quarter of global GDP, two-fifths of global trade in goods, and nearly half of the world’s population.

With the addition of new members, the already “energy rich, energy needy” grouping of Southern or Non-Western nations has become even more influential in the energy sector. Together, BRICS countries represent approximately 28% of global crude oil production and exports, led by Russia and China, and 27% of global petroleum imports, driven primarily by China and India.¹¹ The bloc also holds a significant share of global natural gas and crude oil, as well as critical minerals and rare earth elements, with China and Brazil taking the lead in these sectors.¹²

At the same time, several BRICS countries are rich in renewable energy resources. Some, such as China, Brazil, India and the UEA, are recognized as leaders and innovators in the renewables market. Others, like China and the UEA, have demonstrated consistent progress in decarbonizing their energy matrices in recent years. Notably, Brazil and Ethiopia stand out, with the most of their energy generation already coming from clean energy sources (see Figure 1 below).¹³

Market experts believe that the consolidation of BRICS political and financial institutions, alongside the potential development of an alternative payment mechanism for transactions, could have implications for areas like energy, trade, infrastructure and development financing, monetary policy, and technological cooperation.¹⁴ All of these areas are structurally influencing the agendas discussed here. Energy, in particular, remains the pivotal issue shaping the group's leadership in the global ecological transition. Over the years, energy has gained prominence on the group's agenda, as detailed in Section 2.









The recent expansion of BRICS, coupled with the ongoing geopolitical crisis in Ukraine, have fueled speculation about the creation of a "parallel energy trading system" that could enable transactions outside the Western-led financial system and in alternative currencies. Such a system could reduce dependency on the U.S. dollar, circumvent sanctions (notably in Russia's case), and give BRICS countries greater influence over oil prices.¹⁵ While the creation of this "parallel system" remains speculative, the growing recognition of the bloc as a powerful player in global energy matters underscores its importance in addressing the Triple Planetary Crisis.

Despite these geopolitical opportunities, the group's unity and ability to act collectively are hindered by political and geopolitical tensions both within and among its members. These include the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the accompanying wave of economic sanctions on Russia, as well as diplomatic and military disputes among other members, such as between China and India, Egypt and Ethiopia, and Iran and the UAE.











Furthermore, there is a risk that the expanded BRICS become politically polarized, with thematic cooperation agendas stalled by the more immediate geopolitical priorities of key powers like China and Russia. In this context, the leadership of other BRICS members will be critical in steering the group's agenda towards decisive action on the Triple Planetary Crisis.

Brazil has an important role to play in the coming years as current chair of the NDB and host of the 2025 BRICS Summit. This is even more crucial given the renewed commitments to the environmental agenda by the Workers' Party-led government, which took office in 2023 with a strong emphasis on global cooperation and constructive leadership in environmental matters, including during its G20 presidency in 2024.¹⁶ In addition, Brazil will host the UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP30) in 2025. Moving forward, navigating the geopolitical complexities and aligning the diverse interests of BRICS members will be crucial in transforming the group's rhetoric into tangible outcomes. Success in this endeavour will not only benefit BRICS members but also set a precedent for international cooperation, demonstrating how energy security, energy transition, and global environmental challenges can be reconciled.

Figure 1. Snapshot on BRICS countries**Climate vulnerability¹⁷**

	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Band</u>	<u>Score</u>
	161	Ethiopia	Low	0.547
	138	India	Lower middle	0.498
	97	Indonesia	Lower middle	0.426
	92	Egypt	Lower middle	0.420
	75	South Africa	Upper middle	0.390
	74	China	Upper middle	0.387
	64	Iran	Upper middle	0.379
	58	Brazil	Upper middle	0.374
	53	UAE	Upper	0.371
	23	Russia	Upper	0.326











Biodiversity¹⁸

	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Amphibians</u>	<u>Birds</u>	<u>Fish</u>	<u>Mammals</u>	<u>Reptiles</u>	<u>Plants (WCMC)</u>	<u>Plants (Updated)</u>
	1	Brazil	1,175	1,864	4,930	776	868	56215	34387
	2	Indonesia	393	1,791	5,014	777	799	29375	19232
	3	China	604	1,330	3,838	710	631	32200	31362
	8	India	454	1,271	2,860	436	889	18664	15000
	12	South Africa	132	832	2,165	323	569	23420	21250
	37	Ethiopia	78	852	177	316	244	6603	6700
	47	Iran	23	527	716	214	382	8000	7500
	59	Russia	30	712	1,013	0	2	11400	12500
	85	Egypt	10	480	995	114	118	2250	N/A
	126	UAE	2	448	534	58	74	598	N/A

Top 10 world's oil producing countries (in 2023)¹⁹











	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Million barrels per day</u>	<u>Share of world total</u>
	3	Russia	10.75	11%
	5	China	5.26	5%
	7	Brazil	4.28	4%
	8	UAE	4.16	4%
	9	Iran	4.16	4%
	-	South Africa .....	.....	-
	-	Egypt .....	.....	-
	-	India .....	.....	-
	-	Indonesia .....	.....	-
	-	Ethiopia .....	.....	-

Top 10 world's oil consuming countries (in 2023)²⁰

	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Million barrels per day</u>	<u>Share of world total</u>
	2	China	15.15	15%
	3	India	5.05	5%
	4	Russia	3.68	4%
	7	Brazil	3.03	3%
	-	Indonesia .....	.....	-
	-	UAE .....	.....	-
	-	Iran .....	.....	-
	-	South Africa .....	.....	-
	-	Egypt .....	.....	-
	-	Ethiopia .....	.....	-









Energy Generation (2023*, percentage share)²¹

* For Ethiopia data is from 2022

	<u>Majority clean/fossil</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Wind and Solar</u>	<u>Hydro</u>	<u>Bioenergy</u>	<u>Nuclear</u>	<u>Coal</u>	<u>Gas</u>	<u>Other fossil</u>
	Clean (91%)	Brazil	21	60	8	2	2	5	2
	Fossil (65%)	China	16	13	2	5	61	3	1
	Fossil (89%)	Egypt	5	6	0	0	0	81	8
	Clean (99%)	Ethiopia	4	96	0	0	0	0	0
	Fossil (78%)	India	10	8	2	2	75	3	0
	Fossil (80%)	Indonesia**	0	7	6	0	62	18	2
	Fossil (92%)	Iran	1	6	0	2	0	85	7
	Fossil (64%)	Russia	1	17	0	18	18	45	1
	Fossil (84%)	South Africa	12	1	0	4	82	0	2
	Fossil (72%)	UAE	8	0	0	20	0	72	0

** Indonesia generates 5% of its electricity through “other renewables”

GHG Emissions (MtCO₂e)²²

	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>	<u>2017</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2021</u>
	1	China	11102.92	10976.57	11028.2	11256.52	11752.8	11953.6	12119.66	12791.58
	3	India	3023.53	3043.88	3118.38	3242.05	3407.73	3385.58	3176.03	3419.89
	5	Russia	1630.84	1608.12	1740.17	1773.11	1867.49	1919.68	1836.79	1975.57
	6	Indonesia	1981.44	2020.62	1390.59	1393.73	1648.05	1919.32	1481.59	1484.66
	7	Brazil	1396.9	1382.6	1465.59	1487.79	1445.49	1467.54	1470.25	1531.51
	9	Iran	821.08	819.34	856.89	885.89	880.6	898.34	908.39	952.23
		Egypt	309.81	316.27	326.69	336.7	330.85	306.74	294.97	319.69
		Ethiopia	164.22	167.63	173.97	176.59	179.64	191.35	197.58	192.07
		South Africa	563.22	538.57	538.95	552.19	556.84	563.55	509.29	517.35
		UAE	239.3	251.04	258.48	249.51	233.06	246.29	243.5	249.48

1. BRICS and the global decarbonization and biodiversity protection challenges

The global **decarbonization agenda** focuses on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Central to this effort is transitioning to clean and renewable energy sources, boosting energy efficiency, and adopting sustainable and low-carbon practices across industries like agriculture and transportation, all while avoiding unsustainable overconsumption. Decarbonization isn't just about technological breakthroughs; it calls for economic and social transformations, demanding national coordination, global cooperation, and substantial financial investment. It's no longer one of those optional policies – decarbonization is a necessity for every country, emphasised by international agreements like the 2015 Paris Agreement, scientific consensus, and the increasingly evident effects of climate change worldwide.

The impacts of climate change are already making their mark on the lives and economies of all countries, but the impacts vary between and within countries. Among the BRICS countries, Ethiopia, India, and Egypt are at higher climate vulnerability (see Figure 1 above). Yet, large, diverse and highly unequal countries – including China, Indonesia or Brazil – also face climate challenges in certain regions and populations, making decarbonization a central part of their fight against poverty and inequality.²³

In Brazil, the North and Northeast regions are particularly vulnerable to climate change. These regions, which rank lowest human development and social progress indexes in the country,²⁴ are central to Brazil's shift towards low-carbon economies. This is due not only to the Amazon Rainforest's presence but also to their contributions to renewable energy production, with hydropower in the North and wind and solar power in the Northeast.

The principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) is central to how BRICS countries view the transition to low-carbon economies, both nationally and globally. Originating in the environmental negotiations of the 1990s, CBDR aimed to broaden environmental responsibility by recognizing the varied roles of different countries in contributing to global environmental problems and their capacities to address them.²⁵ Grounded in CBDR-inspired interpretations of climate justice, many argue that Global South nations should retain the ability to continue producing and consuming fossil fuels while wealthier nations begin to take the lead in phasing them out. Similarly, there is a strong belief that historical polluters should finance mitigation, adaptation, and transition projects in the least-developed and particularly climate-vulnerable countries.²⁶

There is undeniable fairness in recognizing *differentiated* responsibilities and capacities among States when addressing complex planetary challenges. This perspective emphasizes the role of developed countries in providing financial resources, sharing technological advancements, and leading the phase-out of fossil fuels. Nonetheless, given the current climate emergency, achieving equitable and fair compromises on these global challenges requires combining historical interpretations of the CBDR principle with current dynamics of power, wealth, capacities, and vulnerabilities.

In other words, while the international community must acknowledge and address historical and structural global inequalities in responsibilities and capacities – often reflected in the North/South or developed/developing country divide – it must also adopt a more dynamic approach of today's landscape of big and small emitters, polluters, and their evolving national capacities. In the climate regime, this

includes the capacity to mitigate emissions, adapt to climate impacts, decarbonize economies, and promote sustainable developmental models that protect biodiversity.

For BRICS countries, this means strategically and pragmatically assessing the broader

implications of decarbonization and biodiversity protection on their own future economic competitiveness, as well as on their responsibility to uphold international treaties and lead globally, as some countries – particularly China – aspire to do on climate change matters.

Box 1. **Are BRICS countries conservative climate powers?**²⁷

Many of the founding and new BRICS members are climate powers, wielding considerable influence over climate futures and climate negotiations. Several of them rank among the world's top GHG emitters, with China, India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, and Iran appearing in the top ten emitters over the past decade. Since the inception of the climate regime in 1992, the share of global GHG emissions from BRICS countries has increased steadily. As major energy producers and importers, their individual and collective actions deeply impact global decarbonization. At the same time, countries like China, Brazil, and, to a smaller extent, India, are also leading innovators in clean energy.

China is a climate heavyweight and the world's largest energy importer, characterized by a still carbon intensive energy matrix that heavily relies on coal. Nonetheless, China is rapidly working to decarbonize. Since its 2015 pledge to accelerate domestic decarbonization and halt coal funding abroad, progress has been notable. China is now the world's largest producer and consumer of renewable energy, heavily investing in wind and solar power. It is also a leader in low-carbon technologies, dominating global value chains for renewable energy products. Climate change and the transition to a Green Economy are increasingly central to China's domestic policies and foreign policy agenda under the framework of Ecological Civilization.

Russia is a leading producer and exporter of fossil fuels, including oil, gas, and coal, with energy as the primary driver of its GHG emissions. Its carbon-intensive energy sector is a cornerstone of the national economy, much like in the UEA, creating resistance to decarbonization from state bureaucracies and economic elites. The decade of wars and economic sanctions since the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 have led Russia to increase oil production to compensate for revenue losses, undermining its decarbonization efforts. The situation became even more complicated following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

India is emerging as a climate heavyweight due to its absolute emissions, though not significantly on a per capita basis. As an energy super-importer, India's share in global emissions is rising, driven by both energy and agricultural sectors. The country is a major coal producer and importer and broader energy resources, making low-carbon energy sources critical for bridging its energy access gap and enhancing energy security, and self-sufficiency. India leads in solar energy technology and promotes it globally through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA). However, climate

change has received uneven attention in its national and foreign policy frameworks, like Brazil. Moving quickly in this space, India recently announced its own taxonomy for climate finance. In the short term, challenges persist in balancing sustainability with accessibility, prioritizing energy storage and nuclear energy policies.

Brazil presents a different profile, with most emissions coming from land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF). Despite being a growing oil producer, Brazil has a relatively low-carbon energy matrix and is largely self-sufficient in energy. The country boasts advanced technological capacity for deep offshore oil exploration, hydropower plants, and biofuel production. Historically, deforestation has been the primary driver of GHG emissions, and though Brazil successfully controlled it from 2004 to 2012, it has struggled to maintain this progress in recent years. Since 2023, a new government has renewed Brazil's climate commitments through robust policy frameworks like the Ecological Transformation Plan, anti-deforestation measures, sustainable development initiatives for the Amazon and Cerrado biomes, and efforts to promote green industrialization. Nonetheless, the government faces challenges in implementing these changes, compounded by its continued commitment to oil producing and exports.

Indonesia is currently the world's sixth-largest emitter, contributing 3.11% of global emissions, with energy production and LULUCF being the primary sources. Despite its significant potential for renewable energy, coal dominates Indonesia's energy generation, with only 20% of its electricity coming from clean sources in 2023—well below the global average of 39%. The country is also a major exporter of thermal coal. Indonesia faces challenges in managing its vast natural resources, which include 10% of the world's tropical rainforests and 36% of its tropical peatlands. High deforestation rates, driven by palm oil cultivation and logging, along with variable peatland megafires, make emissions highly inconsistent year to year. Indonesia's renewable energy share lags behind some regional neighbors. Yet a slow but increasing adoption of renewables is creating green jobs and driving down electricity costs, making them competitive with fossil fuels. Over the last decades, economic growth has significantly increased energy demand, largely met by coal and gas, leaving substantial renewable potential untapped. As an active member of the G77 and not unlike other BRICS countries, Indonesia aims to decarbonize through a phased approach. Its Just Energy Transition Partnership (JET-P) plan targets at least 44% renewable energy in power generation by 2030, signaling a still insufficiently ambitious commitment to a more sustainable energy future.

Iran is highly vulnerable to climate change and is the largest carbon emitter in the Middle East and North Africa, ranking eighth globally. Its emissions come primarily from a heavy dependency on oil and natural gas, with vast reserves making it an important OPEC member and global oil exporter. Government efforts toward mitigation, adaptation, and transitioning to a green economy are limited, hindered by international sanctions affecting its economy, state capacity, and cooperation prospects. Iran has not ratified the Paris Agreement or joined most international sectorial pledges to accelerate climate action, particularly those focused on phasing-out oil and gas production.

Until recently climate change was a peripheral issue in BRICS countries' policy making. This is beginning to shift, particularly in China, where climate change is becoming central to both domestic and foreign policies. A similar policy shift might be also underway in Brazil and even more so in the UEA, which has made consistent efforts to decarbonize its economy, advocate for renewable energy, and innovator in green infrastructure. The UEA hosted COP28 in 2023, and Brazil is set to host COP30 in 2025.

Despite progress, the current global climate regime contains structural inequalities that disproportionately impact large emitters from the Global South, many within the BRICS group. Carbon metrics tend to focus on absolute emissions rather than per capita emissions, disadvantaged populous countries like India, China, Indonesia, or Brazil. The system also penalizes carbon exporters, such as China, Russia, Brazil, and Indonesia, whose goods have a large carbon footprint, including from deforestation.²⁸ These discrepancies arise from traditional inventories that do not account for emissions associated with imported goods.²⁹

Despite these inherent inequalities, BRICS countries need to demonstrate consistent leadership in climate initiatives. While their justified perception of global injustice against the developing world³⁰ has led them to sometimes dismiss important mitigation actions or overly blame industrialized countries for climate issues, using this as an excuse for inaction is not a viable strategy. In the long-term, such an approach risks undermining BRICS countries' ambitions to lead in a post-Western paradigm. It also risks leaving BRICS countries and other developing nations vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Parallel to decarbonization, the **biodiversity protection agenda** focuses on preserving the planet's diverse ecosystems and species. Biodiversity is crucial for maintaining ecological balance, supporting human livelihoods, and ensuring resilience to environmental changes. This agenda emphasizes the need to halt habitat destruction in forest and marine ecosystems, reduce pollution, prevent resource overexploitation, and combat climate change – all factors contributing to biodiversity loss. Additionally, it involves sustainable land and water use, restoring degraded ecosystems, and protecting endangered species, as highlighted in international frameworks like the Convention on Biological Diversity.

These agendas are deeply interconnected. For instance, conserving forests not only serves as a vital carbon sink but also enhances ecosystem resilience to climate change. While a stronger commitment to forest conservation, notably in tropical areas, is key, this interconnection extends beyond forests and should be reflected across different ecosystems. Achieving these goals requires a coordinated global effort, involving countries with diverse economic structures and environmental challenges, such as those in the BRICS group.

Survey of BRICS' engagement with decarbonization and biodiversity issues

High-Level Declarations

High-level declarations from the annual BRICS Summits, attended by heads of states or government, serve as the main policy instrument through which the group functions as an actor in international affairs.³¹ Since the first BRICS Summit in 2009, and as the group's working agenda has expanded, BRICS countries have progressively acknowledged the importance of environmental issues, including climate change and biodiversity protection, in their high-level declarations. Attention to these two agendas has particularly grown since 2014, with the emphasis varying over the years in response to each member country's national priorities. Overall, Summit declarations have stressed the need for sustainable development and the group's commitment to international environmental agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity. These declarations have included commitments to advancing green technologies, promoting sustainable economic growth, and supporting the global energy transition.

The first mention of **biodiversity** appeared in the Summit declaration in 2011, during the meeting in China, and the topic has received increasing attention since then, especially under the presidencies of the three most biodiverse BRICS countries: Brazil, China, and South Africa. Until 2014, the BRICS countries primarily offered formal acknowledgements of United Nations high-level processes. The 2014 Fortaleza Summit marked a turning point with a more substantive discussion, recognizing the importance of resource mobilization targets.³² The intention to enhance intra-BRICS cooperation on biodiversity

conservation was first explicitly mentioned at the 2018 Johannesburg Summit, which emphasized potential areas for cooperation, such as on endangered species and national parks management. The 2023 Johannesburg Summit revisited intra-BRICS cooperation, this time also addressing wildlife trade.³³

Except for the 2015 Summit in Russia, BRICS countries have increasingly engaged with the more substantive element of international processes each year, seeking to present a unified BRICS position on key issues negotiated at the United Nations. This was evident during the 2019 Summit in Brazil, where the countries included more detailed comments on the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework negotiations, emphasizing their concern with a “balance” between pillars.³⁴

In the 2022 China Summit and the 2023 Summit in South Africa, BRICS explicitly addressed “green trade barriers” being implemented to counter climate change and biodiversity loss, calling them as “arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination” or “disguised restrictions on international trade” that do not conform to World Trade Organization agreements³⁵ (more on this issue in Section 3).

The 2023 declaration from the Johannesburg Summit in South Africa stands out as the most comprehensive to date on this issue, bridging both positions on international processes with the potential for intra-BRICS cooperation. This includes initiatives like promoting “the sustainable use of biodiversity in business to support local economic development, industrialisation, job creation, and sustainable business opportunities”. It is clear that this topic is gaining momentum, and biodiversity-rich countries such as Brazil, China, South Africa (and now Indonesia) have the opportunity to continue championing this agenda. They can further integrate it with climate change and decarbonization efforts, as well as other important issues for the group, including inclusive and sustainable development.

Regarding **climate change and decarbonization**, the issue was first mentioned at the initial Summits in 2009 and 2010.

However, a more consistent focus began at the 2011 Summit, in China. Much like with biodiversity, BRICS initially engaged with the UNFCCC process, demonstrating early on a commitment by its members “to work towards a comprehensive, balanced and binding outcome” along with “enhancing our practical cooperation in adapting our economy and society to climate change.”³⁶ Subsequently, Summits consistently addressed the topic, emphasising the CBDR principle and gradually paying more attention to energy-related issues.

The 2012 New Delhi Declaration, for instance, emphasized the importance of ensuring that global climate change efforts do not “cap development” and advocated for “nationally appropriate mitigation actions of developing countries.”³⁷ In the Fortaleza Declaration, BRICS members stated that “fossil fuels remain one of the major sources of energy” while reiterated their support for “renewable and clean energy, research and development of new technologies and energy efficiency” to promote sustainable development and growth.³⁸ Since 2014, energy issues have gained even more prominence in the discussions related to climate change. In 2016, at the Summit in India, BRICS members highlighted the role of both nuclear and low-carbon fuels and other clean sources, stressing the need for international cooperation to access clean energy technology and finance, and to make them accessible and affordable.³⁹

A more robust focus on decarbonization first appeared in the 2017 Summit in China, with mentions of the need for the “effective use” of polluting energy sources and a commitment to fostering a low-carbon and green economy. The declaration highlighted the interconnected goals of “transformation toward a low-emissions economy, improving energy access, and achieving sustainable development.”⁴⁰ These multifaceted energy-related issues – including access, security, affordability, efficiency, and compatibility – were reaffirmed

in the 2018 Summit in South Africa, where “the need to accelerate energy transition” was explicitly recognized.⁴¹

Similar ideas were echoed in subsequent Summits, with specific sector priorities highlighted by each host country. For example, at the 2019 Summit in Brazil, BRICS countries “committed to pursuing the efficient use of fossil fuels while increasing the share of renewable energy”, with particular attention to biofuels, a key priority for Brazil. Similarly, the 2021 Summit in India referenced cooperation on remote sensing technologies, with applications for climate change mitigation, disaster management and environmental protection. This reflected India’s expanding satellite capabilities in its intention to leverage them for national and international environmental and climate initiatives.

Despite these acknowledgements, BRICS countries’ approach to energy transitions remains conservative (see Box 1 above). Their declarations consistently highlight the “sustainable and efficient use of energy sources, including fossil fuels, hydrogen, nuclear and renewable energy,” without making substantive distinctions between clean and fossil energy sources. This framing accommodates the diverse energy profiles within the group but limits the collective ambition and coherence of BRICS as a unified voice on global energy transitions.

Another recurrent theme in recent BRICS declarations has been the call for developed countries to fulfil their climate commitments and historical responsibilities. By reaffirming the CBDR principle, BRICS countries have strongly urged greater access to climate financing and technology transfer, asserting that “developed countries [must] lead by example and support developing countries towards such transitions.”⁴² When advocating for the Global North countries to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, they highlighted that “the peaking of Greenhouse Gas Emissions will take longer for developing countries,” within the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication efforts.⁴³

Similar to biodiversity issues, the 2023 declaration is the most comprehensive on climate negotiations. It reiterates common principled positions and offers critical perspectives on key international negotiations, such as the Global Stocktake, access to finance, and for carbon accounting metrics, including methods to assess emissions and establish sustainability taxonomies.⁴⁴

Climate change and decarbonization are now firmly embedded in the BRICS agenda. Yet, similar to other topics, there is a gradual progress in developing common language and understandings within the group, marked by a conservative approach to energy transition, rarely accompanied by an emphasis on achieving just transitions at home. The specific issues mentioned often vary annually, depending on the presiding country. This includes the type of non-fossil energy sources mentioned – such as nuclear for India or biofuels for Brazil – and the alignment of climate efforts with other economic priorities, like job creation for South Africa, food security for Brazil and South Africa, and energy security for India.⁴⁵

Notably, the idea of renewable energy sources as a “strategic goal for the sustainable growth” of BRICS economies is becoming more frequent in high-level declarations, indicating potential for building consensus and raising ambitions around this issue, at least at the declaratory level. However, BRICS declarations have yet to explicitly link decarbonization, energy transition, and biodiversity protection.

Equally important, the group’s cautious approach to consensus-building and its conservative approach on energy transitions result in both blind-spots and inconsistency within the declarations. For example, the 2023 BRICS Summit Declaration in Johannesburg dedicates several paragraphs (53-55) to biodiversity protection, highlighting the group’s commitment to advancing this agenda at the multilateral level in line with the principles of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and national circumstances, priorities and

capabilities (CBDR-RC). However, the same document also highlights the importance of ensuring access to fertilizers (paragraph 28), which have detrimental effects on biodiversity.⁴⁶ Fertilizers are a significant export product for Russia, with Brazil, China, and India among its major buyers. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, fertilizer exports to other BRICS members have grown exponentially.⁴⁷ Such inconsistencies, which reflect domestic tensions between biodiversity protection and agricultural development in countries like Brazil, China, Indonesia and India, hinder the group’s potential to assume a more meaningful leadership role on biodiversity protection. Looking ahead, a key challenge for the group is to more integrate the decarbonization and biodiversity protection agendas. In countries like Brazil and Indonesia, this linkage is central to national efforts to curb deforestation and reduce carbon footprint.

Sectoral Cooperation Working Groups and Initiatives

Since its inception BRICS has established various sectoral cooperation working groups to address a wide range of thematic issues. These groups provide a platform for member countries to exchange best practices, collaborate on research, and develop joint initiatives. On paper, some groups and initiatives have mandates covering areas such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, environmental protection, and climate change adaptation. Examples include the BRICS Energy Research Cooperation Platform, launched in 2018 as a multistakeholder forum to facilitate information sharing and joint research on energy technologies, including renewables,⁴⁸ and the BRICS Ministerial-level Meetings, which involve Ministries of Environment and Energy to foster intra-BRICS dialogue and cooperation on biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, and several energy-related matters.

These working groups and initiatives aim to align national policies with global goals, although their effectiveness depends on the political will and capacity of individual member States. So far, Energy Ministers have met four times (in 2015, 2019, 2020, and 2021), while Environment Ministers have convened annually since 2015. In 2022, in China, a BRICS High-level Meeting on Climate Change saw Ministers emphasize their national efforts, support to multilateral processes, and calls for developed countries to fulfil their responsibilities towards financing mitigation, adaptation, and transition in the Global South. They also committed to “strengthening collaboration on climate change, broadening the areas and deepening the contents of cooperation.”⁴⁹ In 2023, BRICS countries established an Alliance for Green Tourism. How this intention to deepen collaboration will translate into actions, whether at the bilateral or group-level, remains to be seen.

Is fair to say that these working groups and initiatives, much like other efforts to increase intra-BRICS sectoral cooperation, remain underdeveloped and not fully tapped for their potential. Promises to “best coordinate positions among BRICS countries,” including concerning climate change, decarbonization, and biodiversity,⁵⁰ often remain unfulfilled. Despite the proliferation of groups and initiatives, these seldom translate into political will and resources needed to foster substantive cooperation within the group. Nearly every Summit introduces a new initiative, based on the host country’s preferences, without effectively building on existing efforts. In the agendas of climate change, decarbonization, and biodiversity protection, these represent missed opportunities. A notable exception in terms of progress in intra-BRICS cooperation is the New Development Bank (NDB), which will be discussed in the next section.

2. BRICS and the multilateral development, climate, and biodiversity processes

BRICS countries have individually and collectively expressed a desire to reform the global financial architecture established by the Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Founded in the aftermath of World War II, these institutions have long been dominated by Western countries, leading to criticisms of their governance structures and policy prescriptions. BRICS members have long argued for a more balanced and inclusive global financial system that better reflects the economic realities and developmental needs of emerging markets and developing countries.⁵¹ They contend that the Bretton Woods institutions have historically prioritized the agendas of powerful Western countries and imposed austerity measures and conditionalities that may not align with the socio-economic priorities of borrower nations.

By advocating for these reforms, the BRICS aims to enhance their influence in global economic governance and ensure that international financial institutions are more responsive to the diverse needs of Non-Western and developing nations in the Global South. This includes pushing for greater voting power within the IMF and the World Bank.

Faced with only modest reforms within the existing structures, BRICS countries have progressively gravitated towards creating alternative institutions and arrangements. These efforts demonstrate their potential to lead a “Southern multilateralism”⁵² that challenges or complements Western-led institutions by better serving their needs and those of other developing countries. This background explains the emergence of BRICS-led initiatives such as the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and the New Development Bank (NDB), as well as recent debates around

de-dollarization. Collectively, these initiatives pave the way for reducing dependency on Western-led economic institutions and reliance on the U.S. dollar as a reserve currency, medium of exchange, or unit of account.

Beyond Bretton Woods: the BRICS-led New Development Bank

The New Development Bank (NDB) is BRICS most important initiative, driving the group’s global sustainability agenda. Since its inception, the NDB has prioritized infrastructure and sustainable development projects in its member countries. The Bank’s mandate includes financing renewable energy projects, enhancing energy efficiency, and supporting climate resilience initiatives. Unlike other Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), the NDB is unique as an institution “created by emerging market economies and developing countries (EMDCs) to address the needs and aspirations of EMDCs.”⁵³ It is also the first MDB created solely by developing countries without participation of developed countries.

Fully operational since 2016, the NDB remains modest in size compared to other MDBs, but it has funded numerous projects focused on improving energy infrastructure and increasing the share of renewables in the borrowing countries’ energy mix. The bank has also financed projects aimed at upgrading energy and power facilities to strengthen their environmental performance

or reduce pollution.⁵⁴ The NDB's support for these "green projects" is an essential part of group's contribution to global decarbonization efforts and, in some cases, to biodiversity conservation. Based on the bank's own typology, as of August 2024, it has approved 101 projects,⁵⁵ with three focuses on "environmental protection"⁵⁶ and 15 on "clean energy and energy efficiency."⁵⁷

In its new Strategy document published in 2022, the bank affirms that 40% of its total project approvals are dedicated to climate change mitigation and adaptation, supporting the "national strategies of its member countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by financing renewable energy and green, resilient infrastructure with the aim of low-carbon growth."⁵⁸ Other studies indicate that as of December 2022, approximately a quarter of the NDB's USD 81 billion portfolio went into financing transport infrastructure, with clean energy infrastructure accounting for 18% of the portfolio.⁵⁹ During her tenure as NDB President, Brazil's former President Dilma Rousseff expressed a desire to expand the bank's portfolio to include projects that bridge the environmental and social agendas, with a strong emphasis on reducing poverty and inequality.⁶⁰

NDB's business model differs from existing multilateral institutions, like the World Bank, not only in its narrower mandate and focus on financing sustainable infrastructure but also in its operational instruments. The bank relies on a "leaner structure" and does not aim to become a "knowledge bank" advising clients on policy matters. Instead, it relies on financial intermediaries, including national development banks, and employs a "country systems approach"⁶¹ to guide its operations, rather than developing its own parallel corporate systems. This approach influences how the risks and impacts of its projects are assessed and mitigated.

According to NDB's 2017 Environmental and Social Framework, borrowing countries are responsible for conducting environmental and social assessments, including evaluations of biodiversity and climate change risks and impacts for NDB-funded projects. These self-assessments must be "fully consistent with the key requirements of NDB's Environmental and Social Policy and Environmental and Social Standards". The NDB addresses any gaps by engaging with clients to take appropriate actions to fully achieve the objectives of this Framework".⁶²

The NDB's Environmental and Social Framework explicitly states that the Bank does not "knowingly support" projects involving the trade in wildlife or the production of wildlife products regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), as well as activities prohibited by legislation of the project's host country or by international conventions related to biodiversity resources or cultural heritage protection.

While the NDB has successfully established its reputation among the family of MDBs, the scale of its investments and its systemic transformative potential remain limited. Currently, the bank faces challenges in achieving scale, increasing capital, and managing geopolitical and political tensions within the core group of BRICS founders.⁶³ Despite consolidating its "lean and green business-model," many argue that the Bank has not yet been transformative enough, lacking the ambition and means to fulfill its founding promises of "doing things differently."⁶⁴ This is particularly crucial in the current climate emergency, which requires more profound changes in development and climate finance, away from the "business-as-usual-approach."⁶⁵ Experts suggest that reducing dollar-denominated transactions

could help the NDB expand its operations and impact, especially given the growing weaponization of the dollar by the United States and Europe against Russia.⁶⁶ Although the bank has so far managed to avoid triggering sanctions, there remains a risk this could happen in the future.

More importantly, the NDB should adopt a more strategic role in promoting ecological transition within BRICS countries and across the Global South. Raising its mandate-related ambitions could help the bank expand its influence and reach. Moving forward, a new, more ambitious approach to sustainability and sustainable development is needed – one that surpasses the limitations of its current corporate strategy. This would involve a clearer focus on decarbonization and biodiversity protection. To achieve this, the NDB could position itself as a mission-oriented institution dedicated to financing ecological transitions in BRICS countries, and elsewhere in the Global South by partnering with local actors and institutions committed to these objectives.

Such a shift would provide an opportunity for the bank to fully realize its claims of originality and innovation, paving the way for just ecological transitions, certainly one the greatest development missions of this century for any international financial institution.⁶⁷ Achieving this would require enhancing the bank's human resources capacity and expanding partnerships with other financial institutions and local networks in borrowing countries to strengthen NDB's portfolio in decarbonization and biodiversity protection.

Furthermore, it would need more robust environmental and social frameworks to guide the construction of sustainable infrastructure in sensitive ecosystems, including tropical forests like the Amazon. In this regard, the NDB could collaborate with other multilaterals, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which has been a leader in bridging forest conservation, climate action, and sustainable development with initiatives like the "Amazon Initiative" and the more recent "Amazonia Forever."⁶⁸

Box 2. NDB's role in bridging and boosting development and climate financing

The New Development Bank (NDB), established by Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa, marks a significant evolution beyond the traditional Bretton Woods framework. Its mandate focuses on financing infrastructure and sustainable development projects with BRICS nations and other emerging economies. Strategically, the NDB prioritizes promoting clean energy, supporting decarbonization projects, and fostering sustainable infrastructure development. To innovate in these areas, the bank offers a variety of financial instruments, including loans, guarantees, and equity investments, specifically tailored to the needs of its member countries, primarily emerging market economies and developing countries.

The NDB is BRICS most effective tool for clarifying and operationalizing the nexus between development and climate finance amidst ongoing discussions on reforming international financial institutions and Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs). Between 2015 and 2022, the NDB emerged as the largest MDB provider of climate-related financing to National Development Banks, allocating a total of USD 2,378 million for such projects.⁶⁹ This substantial financial commitment underscores the NDB's role in supporting national efforts to combat climate change. The Bank's investments have been directed towards initiatives such as renewable energy projects, energy efficiency improvements, and sustainable urban development.

Though still modest in scale, the NDB offers a unique opportunity for BRICS countries to amplify their efforts in addressing not only climate change but also biodiversity loss. By leveraging the NDB, BRICS nations can support and expand recent climate and biodiversity protection initiatives. For instance, the Tropical Forest Forever Facility aims to protect and restore tropical forests, which serve as vital carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots. Other initiatives, such as climate debt swaps, carbon markets, and Payment for Environmental Services (PES) programs, provide innovative financial mechanisms to incentivize environmental stewardship and sustainable land use. With its financial resources and strategic focus, the NDB can boost these initiatives – some of which are already being piloted by other MDBs – thereby driving tangible progress in the global fight against climate change and biodiversity degradation.

The BRICS at UN Climate and Biodiversity Conferences (COPs)

The Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings, held under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), are critical platforms for global negotiations on climate and biodiversity issues. The BRICS countries have actively participated in these conferences, advocating for equitable and ambitious global agreements that reflect the developmental needs and responsibilities of both developed and developing countries. While BRICS countries do not always act as *a unified group* with common positions, they have coordinated on certain issues and pursued other alliances and partnerships over the years.

An example is the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) formed during the Climate COP15 in Copenhagen, which remains an informal coordination forum for international climate matters.⁷⁰ Another example is the G77+China, a traditional forum for developing countries within the United Nations. Despite these various alliances, some convergent views of multilateral processes have emerged among BRICS members over time (as discussed in Section 1).

At **Climate COPs**, for instance, BRICS+ nations have consistently emphasized the principles of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC). They have argued that developed countries should take the lead in reducing emissions and providing financial and technological support to developing countries. This stance is based on the recognition that historical emissions from industrialized economies have contributed to the current climate crisis, and that developing countries need support to pursue sustainable development pathways.

As highlighted earlier, BRICS countries can be categorized as “conservative climate powers”⁷¹ within the climate regime, based on their emissions trajectories, domestic policies, and international commitments. Despite their shared responsibility in contributing to the climate crisis and their rhetorical advocacy for systemic reform in other global governance areas, BRICS countries have exhibited a conservative approach to climate negotiations. This has resulted in insufficient ambition or diplomatic activism necessary to push for measures for climate change mitigation, often falling short of driving transformative global action.

Moreover, China and India have led the G77+China coalition, advocating for a radical interpretation of the CBDR principle in global negotiations, which emphasize a substantial commitment from developed countries to reduce emissions first. Nonetheless, in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), China has pledged to reduce its carbon emissions, with a projected peak around 2030, and is reportedly on track. Conversely, India remains resistant to the idea of mandated emissions reductions for developing countries, interpreting the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities as if “almost nothing is common and everything is differentiated.”⁷² Russia is among the least ambitious and least credible G20 countries in terms of implementation except perhaps for Saudi Arabia.

At **Biodiversity COPs**, BRICS countries have highlighted the importance of conserving biodiversity while promoting sustainable development. They advocate for increased financial resources for biodiversity conservation, technology transfer, and capacity-building initiatives. They frequently highlight the CBDR principle, calling on developed countries to provide adequate means of implementation for global biodiversity commitments.

As previously noted, most activism on this agenda within BRICS comes from the diplomatic efforts of the group's most biodiverse members: Brazil, China, and South Africa. Despite being one of the world's most biodiverse countries, India has not consistently assumed a leadership role on this issue at the UN or within BRICS.

While BRICS countries do not always present united fronts at COP meetings, they converge in their bilateral policies and through other groups, such as G77+China and BASIC, to influence global negotiations and ensure outcomes that are fair and conducive to achieving sustainable development goals. The consistent inclusion of COP references in BRICS Summit Declarations, particularly since 2014, and their progressive substantive engagement with ongoing negotiation topics as a group, indicate a willingness to articulate common positions – even when there are differences and disagreements.

By focusing on consensual matters, BRICS countries aim to strengthen their voice on key principled positions, such as emphasizing the primary responsibility of developed countries to decarbonize and support the developing world in doing so, by providing access to finance and technology. Likewise, in biodiversity negotiations, BRICS countries remain united in emphasizing respect for “national circumstances, priorities and capabilities” and underscore the importance of international cooperation to foster technology and innovation for biodiversity protection.

3. Can BRICS be a driving force on these agendas?

As discussed, BRICS has the potential to be a multiplier in scaling and accelerating action across both the decarbonization and biodiversity protection agendas through diplomatic activism, sectoral cooperation, and innovative financing tools like the NDB. In this section, we focus on two major challenges to action: the conservative normative interpretations of the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), and the challenges of policy coherence. To illustrate these points, we'll examine examples from selected BRICS members, specifically Brazil, China, and the UAE, while acknowledging that similar dynamics exist among other members.

Rethinking and updating CBDR

The first challenge involves the need to rethink and update the CBDR principle, or rather its operationalization, to better facilitate global cooperation in the 21st century. CBDR has been a foundational principle guiding environmental and development-related multilateral debates since the 1990s. While it remains a crucial pillar of contemporary international cooperation, its application presents both challenges and opportunities for the agendas at hand. In the following discussion, we will revisit some of the major strengths and weaknesses of CBDR before addressing the need to update the principle to foster new consensus and initiatives in decarbonization and biodiversity protection.

The CBDR principle is crucial for achieving fairer global solutions – grounded in justice and equity⁷³ – to the Triple Planetary Crisis. It acknowledges the greater historical contributions of developed countries to environmental degradation, assigning them a leading role in mitigation efforts and financial

support. By recognizing these disparities, CBDR promotes equitable participation by accommodating the diverse capacities of countries, and allowing developing nations to make realistic commitments based on their resources and technological capabilities. It also fosters international cooperation, encouraging developed countries to provide financial and technological support to developing nations, thereby enhancing their ability to engage in sustainable practices and improve resilience. In addition, CBDR integrates environmental protection with the socio-economic development needs of poorer countries, ensuring that environmental policies do not impede development goals. In decarbonization efforts, it stipulates that developed countries must lead the way and assist developing countries in their transition.

However, CBDR also has notable weaknesses. Its ambiguity regarding what constitutes “common” and “differentiated” responsibilities can lead to varied interpretations, complicating the implementation of concrete actions and commitments. This vagueness may result in reduced ambition among some countries, which might adopt less stringent environmental policies by leaning on developed nations’ historical responsibilities. This is particularly evident among several of the BRICS nations, notably those that are now major polluters and carbon emitters. Furthermore, CBDR can heighten tensions both between developed and developing nations, and the larger group of developing nations, especially regarding perceptions of fairness and the adequacy of support, potentially stalling negotiations. Defining fair contributions, such as financial aid and emissions reductions, can also be contentious, leading to disputes over whether countries are fulfilling their obligations. Finally, as some developing countries experience economic growth and increase their environmental impacts, the distinction between developed and developing nations becomes blurred, challenging CBDR’s application and relevance.

While the notion of “difference” and “differentiation,” along with the CBDR principle, has been instrumental in framing global environmental agreements – ensuring fairness and inclusivity – the principle now faces challenges as the political dynamics of 21st-century multilateral cooperation have evolved. Solutions based on “differentiated universality,” which rely on “differentiated responsibility” and “differentiated capacity,” require rethinking. The assumption that differentiation – especially one rooted in rigid North-South binaries – will naturally “translate into greater support for multilateralism from all member states, thereby increasing multilateral legitimacy and problem-solving capacity,”⁷⁴ should be reconsidered.

“Scaled approaches” or “concentric circles” may offer a more effective framework than binary ones, allowing for more nuanced and gradual considerations of countries national circumstances and facilitating a more proactive and ambitious response by the international community to urgent planetary crises. Updating the notion of CBDR should also consider collective responsibility and political willingness to act, whether through BRICS or other “mini-lateral” groups like the G20. The absence of these elements can lead to foreign policy inconsistency or hypocrisy, which we will explore next.

Acting on policy (in)coherence

The second challenge BRICS countries face to boost their leadership in decarbonization and biodiversity protection agendas relates to the disconnects between domestic and international priorities and instruments, as well as inconsistencies across multiple multilateral arenas. These disconnects highlight different forms of policy incoherence, where actions in one area can conflict or even undermine actions in another. While the idea of policy coherence has been extensively explored in the context of North-South development cooperation,⁷⁵ it is equally relevant for major Southern players, such as the BRICS countries, in today’s world.

Brazil is a good example of the need to pursue policy coherence. The South American giant has a long history of climate diplomatic activism, with its stances varying in conservatism over time. Since 2023, amid an ongoing reconstruction of Brazilian foreign policy,⁷⁶ the government has prioritized the environment and climate change in its return to international politics. The country is accelerating its Ecological Transition domestically and boosting its diplomatic activism on environmental issues, notably in protecting tropical forests. Brazil has volunteered to host the COP30 in 2025 and announced the creation of a new international fund, the Tropical Forest Forever Facility, to raise funds for protecting tropical forests worldwide. Brazil is also a leader within multilaterals like the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), fostering innovative thinking and action to promote sustainable development across the Amazon Basin.

The IDB is currently piloting an ecosystem-wide approach to financing sustainable development across the Amazon Basin. Aligning these initiatives with the BRICS agenda – beginning with the BRICS-led NDB – is crucial for ensuring policy both domestically and internationally. It can also support Brazil's diplomatic priorities, including the Tropical Forest Forever Facility and other Amazon-related initiatives the country currently champions.

As for China, Xi Jinping has consistently prioritized the concept of Ecological Civilization as a cornerstone of both domestic and foreign policy. China is already an economic and political force in global decarbonization, driven by the scale of its domestic economy, its status as a major energy importer, and its role as a leading financier of low-carbon energy globally.

However, China's contributions to multilateral action on biodiversity conservation have been comparatively more modest. The country recently announced the creation of the Kunming Biodiversity Fund, aimed at supporting biodiversity conservation in other developing countries.⁷⁷ This Fund is a welcome addition to the growing portfolio of China-led global development funds and initiatives, including the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, co-managed by the UN system.

A key challenge for China in the years ahead will be to strategically align and leverage its many funding mechanisms.⁷⁸ Creating synergies between existing platforms and maximising their impact will be critical for enhancing China's leadership on biodiversity and global development agendas.

Another challenge for China is aligning its expanding multilateral commitments and initiatives with the realities of its booming economic relations – particularly trade and investments – with the developing world. In Brazil-China and Indonesia-China relations, for instance, addressing deforestation risks⁷⁹ in agricultural supply chains, especially for

soy, beef, and palm oil, is critical to ensuring coherence between foreign policy goals on both decarbonization and biodiversity protection. A more proactive and collaborative approach to this issue could benefit Brazil, Indonesia and China, as well as other BRICS countries, by providing a constructive response to concerns over what they refer to as “green protectionism”, as discussed earlier.

Rather than being perceived as “unilateral protectionist” measures, negotiated and joint actions by Brazil and China to reduce deforestation risks, such as enhancing traceability mechanisms⁸⁰ in agricultural supply chains – could strengthen their mutual commitments to mitigate climate change and protect biodiversity.

A similar challenge is seen in China-Russia relations, a growing strategic partnership where the Green Agenda remains largely absent. The omission of green issues and their subordination to the strategic priority of countering United States influence – primarily through oil-related collaboration and trade – undermines China's strategic efforts to position environmental concerns as a cornerstone of its diplomacy.⁸¹

A final example relates to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has made consistent efforts to decarbonize its economy and position itself as a global leader – or even climate change champion – among major oil-producers. However, gaps remain between UAE's recent commitments and its long-term strategies to decarbonize. For instance, the country plans to increase fossil fuel production and consumption by 2030, alongside its diplomatic stances regarding the phasing-out of fossil fuels. Given its current emissions trajectory, the UAE – like other BRICS countries – appears to be operating with minimal to no meaningful action on climate change, a stance that is inconsistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C.⁸²

In addition to addressing foreign policy coherence challenges, BRICS nations must also pay attention to inconsistencies at the global policy-making level, notably in fostering synergies among existing multilateral initiatives. Here, BRICS countries have a unique opportunity to strengthen their international voice by aligning efforts across the various processes they are already active in or championing.

Many BRICS countries are also G20 members and will play leading roles by “holding the G20 pen” through a succession of Global South G20 presidencies. India in 2023, Brazil in 2024, and South Africa in 2025. A similar alignment is possible within the Climate COP Troika, as both Brazil and UAE holding prominent positions in 2024.

Brazil has experienced a shift from being described as an “international pariah” to re-engaging in traditional multilateralism, once again playing a prominent role on the global stage. With leadership positions such as the G20 Presidency, the NDB Presidency, and upcoming roles in presiding over BRICS and hosting COP30 in 2025, Brazil is at the forefront of numerous international initiatives.

This resurgence brings with it high expectations for Brazil to harmonise and create synergies between these processes. The challenge lies in addressing the longstanding issues of fragmentation and duplication within the multilateral system. The emerging trend towards “mini-lateral” debates offers no easy solution to these problems. For Brazilian diplomacy to succeed in its strategic objective of strengthening multilateralism to moderate great power dynamics, it must ensure that its actions do not inadvertently weaken the very multilateral frameworks it aims to strengthen.

A similar, and perhaps even more urgent, reasoning applies to China. Beijing has expanded its global development commitments in an explicit effort to re-energize collective action to fulfil the 2030 Agenda, which is currently off-track. In recent years, China has announced a series of bilateral and multilateral initiatives to deepen high-level exchanges and cooperation on sustainable development, including through South-South Cooperation. These initiatives feature new instruments such as the Green Belt and Road Initiative/Green Silk Road, the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, and the recently announced Kunming Biodiversity Fund, among others.

In sum, as the examples of Brazil and China demonstrate, there is a clear opportunity for BRICS countries to better align their domestic and foreign policies, as well as their different foreign policy tools and initiatives. This includes creating synergies between their activities within the BRICS grouping and other initiatives they champion in other spaces and forums. Addressing policy (in)coherence is key for effectively addressing the decarbonization and biodiversity protection challenges that BRICS countries have theoretically recognized and committed to tackling both domestically and globally.

Conclusion

This Global Futures Bulletin argues that, while BRICS countries have made notable strides in addressing global decarbonization and biodiversity protection challenges, both individually and collectively, the group faces significant hurdles in translating high-level commitments into concrete actions. The diversity of its members' economic interests and environmental challenges necessitates a nuanced approach that balances ambitious environmental goals with developmental needs. The ongoing expansion and strengthening of the group will be crucial in determining the future effectiveness of the group's environmental agenda, particularly in supporting global efforts to transition to low-carbon economies and protect biodiversity.

BRICS serves as a “mini-lateral” forum bringing together major energy players, which can strengthen low-carbon energy cooperation among member countries and help the world shift towards a low-carbon and biodiverse future. This shift is important not only for the economic advantages of individual nations but also for securing a viable future for the planet. To achieve this, more ambitious pledges from all BRICS countries concerning these agendas are necessary for a consistent international advance in addressing climate change and protecting biodiversity. Some countries in the group, notably China, and to a lesser extent also Brazil and the UEA, have shown will and capacity (even if not consistently so) to implement commitments. Sustaining this momentum is key.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in translating high-level commitments into concrete actions. The diversity of the BRICS countries' economic and environmental contexts makes achieving consensus on specific initiatives complex. Additionally, BRICS ability to scale up contributions to global environmental goals is often constrained by financial and political factors. As the group expands and evolves, particularly with the inclusion of new members, its environmental agenda effectiveness will depend on addressing these challenges and fostering greater coherence and collaboration among its members.

The group's political ambitions to serve as progressive voices in environmental matters are present to varying degrees among member countries. However, the overall stance remains subject to geopolitical dynamics, conservative (and somewhat outdated) interpretations of common but differentiated responsibilities, and numerous policy inconsistencies. Greater leadership by biodiverse countries and renewable energy champions within BRICS can guide the group towards more progressive leadership roles and catalyse collective action in the years to come.

Policy recommendations

Advancing intra-BRICS cooperation and relying on innovators: There has been much discussion about deepening sectoral dialogue and cooperation within the BRICS group. To move from words to actions, BRICS countries should explore “low-hanging fruits” for intra-BRICS cooperation on climate change and biodiversity-relevant issues, leveraging the innovation and expertise they already possess. This includes areas such as satellite technology for environmental monitoring, where Brazil and India are leaders; renewable energy technologies, in which China, Brazil, India, and the UAE excel; and biodiversity conservation in protected areas, led by Brazil, South Africa, China, and now also Indonesia.

Enhancing the role of the NDB in bridging climate, biodiversity, and development finance: The NDB stands out as BRICS’ most concrete and effective tool for cooperation thus far, contributing to the agendas of decarbonization and biodiversity protection. Moving forward, the NDB should more clearly position itself as a mission-oriented institution to finance the ecological transition in the Global South. To achieve this, it can champion an alliance of multilateral development banks such as the Inter-American Development Bank, to promote sustainable and resilient infrastructure in sensitive ecosystems.

Policy coherence for concerted global action: The (geo)political mission behind BRICS is to reform global governance. In times marked by multiple, intertwined, crisis, BRICS countries should leverage their collective strength to advance reformist initiatives and efforts already being debated and planned on the global stage. BRICS needs to better recognize the interconnectedness between decarbonization and biodiversity protection and advocate for a better understanding and operationalisation of the nexus between climate and development finance within a reformed multilateral system. These priorities should be integrated across the foreign policy and global initiatives they are engaged in or championing, including the COPs, UN processes, and various G20-led initiatives. Using their political and economic influence to enhance synergy, rather than contribute to fragmentation, is key to the success of any multilateral effort to address the Triple Planetary Crisis.

Endnotes

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