

Escalating tension between members of BRICS

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Foreign ministers of BRICS will convene in India on 14 and 15 May 2026. Abbas Araghchi of Iran is anticipated to attend. The United Arab Emirates is also a member of the Group. The Chinese Foreign Minister will be absent from the meeting in New Delhi because he will be in Beijing for President Trump's meeting with President Xi. *The Economic Times of India*, on 12 May 2026, describes this as “an intriguing development in global diplomacy.” Compounding this intrigue is the fact that China is designating its ambassador in Delhi as its envoy, rather than dispatching a vice-foreign minister or a Politburo-level official. In diplomatic etiquette, substituting an in-country ambassador for the foreign minister at a ministerial conference represents a significant downgrade in status, though couched in terms of logistics and ongoing commitment.

China's decision to reduce its diplomatic presence in Delhi indicates that, in the short term, Beijing values its relationship with President Trump over allocating political resources to a more complex BRICS, particularly on contentious matters like the conflict in Iran. It emphasises China's intention to maintain BRICS as a symbolic entity while relegating it to a strategically subordinate role, alongside the Bloc's increasing challenges in achieving unified action during critical security crises, such as the situation in Iran. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has emphasised that China

highly values BRICS and endorses India's leadership and the Greater BRICS initiative, indicating an effort to mitigate the perception of demotion.

The lack of a senior delegate indicates a trend. China's president and senior officials have begun either to absent themselves from some BRICS meetings or to delegate deputies, which is often interpreted as an indication that BRICS has diminished in significance as a premier diplomatic platform for Beijing. Moreover, observers argue that this indicates a recalibration on China's part. It continues to regard BRICS as a symbol of Global South solidarity. However, it perceives it as less effective for achieving tangible results due to its expansion, rendering the coalition cumbersome and complicating consensus-building. Commentators have progressively characterised BRICS as "larger, yet more empty than ever," with missing leaders and conflicting agendas impairing its capacity to articulate a unified stance.

By dispatching only its ambassador, China signals its unwillingness to invest high-level political resources in reconciling the internal divisions in Delhi. This allows other actors – India as chair, together with Russia and significant new members such as Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia – to influence perceptions, possibly steering BRICS in ways that may not quite coincide with Beijing's wishes. In summary, China's actions reveal rather than instigate BRICS disunity. It clarifies that Beijing will not serve as the ultimate arbiter for an enlarged and internally fragmented coalition.

The expanded BRICS has had difficulty establishing a coherent, uniform stance on Iran. Collective utterances have often conveyed nothing more than serious concern, highlighting the little commonality inherent in agreement. It was unsuccessful in coordinating a disjointed BRICS response that included nations aligned with Washington's stance.

China particularly indicates that it will refrain from allowing BRICS to involve it in external regional conflicts; its policy towards Iran will persist as one of strategic patience, measured assistance, and cautious diplomacy, mostly conducted through great-power channels rather than through BRICS. This incident reinforces a pattern in which BRICS serves as a valuable symbolic platform for "Global South" discourse

and selective economic collaboration (e.g., the New Development Bank) but lacks the strategic unity to influence hard-security results.

The disunity within BRICS was evident during a recent deputy-level conference in New Delhi. The initiative disintegrated without a unified declaration following a public confrontation between the UAE and Iran over the conflict in West Asia, highlighting how the expanded membership directly integrates regional rivalry into BRICS. That rivalry may boil over in Delhi during the Foreign Ministers' meeting.

The Wall Street Journal reported on 12 May 2026 [<https://on.wsj.com/3QUbnggh>] that the UAE had conducted military attacks on Iran. In early April 2026, the UAE conducted military operations against Iranian territory, including an assault on an oil facility located on Lavan Island in the Persian Gulf. The recent assaults, unacknowledged by Abu Dhabi, allegedly aimed at Iranian energy facilities and were characterised as indicative of a more assertive Emirati readiness to employ force to safeguard its economic interests and regional dominance. Since the beginning of March 2026, Iran has already retaliated with extensive barrages of ballistic missiles and drones targeting the UAE and Kuwait, with some reports indicating that over 2,800 Iranian missiles and drones were launched at the UAE throughout the wider conflict. Washington is seen as having discreetly embraced Emirati participation, perceiving it as a means to exert pressure on Tehran, even during the period when President Trump declared a truce.

The assaults referenced in the WSJ report will undoubtedly exacerbate bilateral tensions during the meeting; however, an overt rupture is improbable. Rather, it will intensify pre-existing divisions and steer the group towards minimal consensus outcomes and meticulously crafted communiqués, rather than overt disunity. As the BRICS chair for 2026, India will convene the foreign ministers, with a program that highlights discussions on West Asia, economic matters, and collaborative engagement with Prime Minister Modi. Indian officials have clearly indicated that the intensifying violence in West Asia will be included in the agenda. The UAE will consequently engage in discussions with Tehran present. The Delhi summit will now confront a tangible intra-BRICS security dilemma instead of an abstract discourse about "West Asia tensions." Iran possesses significant motivations to utilise the BRICS platform to denounce assaults on its land, characterise them as

infringements of sovereignty, and associate them with overarching critiques of US-aligned military operations in the area. The UAE, in contrast, will adhere to its official stance that it possesses the right to respond to hostile actions and may refrain from disclosing operational specifics, while citing recurrent Iranian missile and drone assaults on its territory as justification. For the other members of the Group, witnessing a breakup between two colleagues may be an uncomfortable situation, compounded by the challenge of determining whom to support or denounce.

This dynamic nearly ensures intense yet predominantly private discussions, particularly during any session focused on regional security. India, alongside Russia and China as principal agenda-setters, will likely endeavour to compartmentalise the dispute, directing discussions towards neutral topics such as de-escalation, general respect for sovereignty, and the necessity for regional dialogue, rather than permitting the explicit identification of either party in official conclusions.

Before this incident, observers noted that the enlarged BRICS comprises nations with differing threat assessments and security alignments, complicating the establishment of a cohesive position on conflicts such as the Iran war. The concurrent inclusion of previous regional adversaries – namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – was perceived as a challenge to determining whether BRICS could harmonise conflicting Middle Eastern security priorities under a unified framework. *The WSJ* disclosures intensify the underlying tension by exposing one BRICS member as a covert aggressor against another, while the latter publicly assaults its Gulf neighbour. The gathering will strengthen the belief, particularly in Western discourse, that BRICS is a "house of cards," with its members uniting more in their criticism of Western hegemony than in any cohesive security framework. ["The BRICS Bloc Is a House of Cards" in the *WSJ* dated 11 March 2026 <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-brics-bloc-is-a-house-of-cards-7d72dce7>]