

Escalating tension between members of BRICS

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Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are full members of BRICS. Foreign ministers of the Group will convene in India on 14 and 15 May 2026. Abbas Araghchi of Iran is anticipated to attend. Current reports do not verify the personal attendance of the Saudi Foreign Minister, nor is there any definitive public indication of which Saudi official will represent the kingdom. The same is true for the UAE's representative. 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 2026¹ 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. Iran has targeted all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including assaults on military installations of the United States and civilian infrastructure, such as airports and oil facilities. Iran's aerial assault on its Gulf neighbours has been focused on the UAE, with over 2,800 missiles and drones deployed against UAE territory – surpassing any other nation.

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 United States-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. The UAE's aggressive actions against Iran are particularly noteworthy as they signify the implementation of its commitment to join the United States and Israel in action. The Saudi decision to attack Iran highlights the severity of the threat that Saudi Arabia perceives from Iran and the necessity for an aggressive response to prevent future Iranian assaults. Saudi Arabia's participation underscores the escalation of the conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically been regional adversaries, vying for dominance throughout the Middle East. ²

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 current crisis in the Gulf, observers had already noted that the enlarged BRICS already 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 two members of BRICS covertly acting against a third member, while the latter publicly assaults its Gulf neighbours. 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 same applies to Saudi action. Recently, the UAE has deliberately allied itself with the United States and Israel, especially over regional security and issues related to Iran. Furthermore, the United States has classified the UAE as a Major Defense Partner, a designation applied to non-NATO countries that are allies and significant to defense. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia has strong connections with the United States and has cultivated a robust rapport with President Trump.

The ongoing issue about Iran has shown significant internal discord within BRICS. This difference illustrates pre-existing asymmetries: the military collaboration between Russia and Iran, along with China's energy ties to Iran, stands in contrast to the close security alliances that India and the Gulf monarchies have with the United States, as well as their apprehensions about Iranian power projection. Consequently, the conflict in Iran has failed to provide a cohesive BRICS stance. Conversely, it has exacerbated intra-bloc divisions, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Commentaries on the Iran conflict openly contend that the crisis challenges BRICS and exposes its limitations, emphasising that the Group is not equipped to function as a security framework, thereby permitting members to adopt selective and at times contradictory policies under a vague cover. The expanded BRICS now includes rivals such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which naturally reveals inconsistencies in collective action capabilities, particularly in regional crises where their interests vary significantly. The strikes would indicate a hardening of the stance by the UAE and Saudi Arabia against Iran, thereby heightening the likelihood of extensive reprisals

from Tehran and further instability throughout the Gulf. For the other members of the Group, witnessing a breakup between three members may be an uncomfortable situation, compounded by the challenge of determining whom to support or denounce. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia and the UAE positions BRICS as an energy powerhouse closely aligned with Washington. Their participation in military action against a fellow member undermines BRICS' self-portrayal as a proponent of peaceful multipolarity.

The meeting in Delhi will undoubtedly 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.³

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¹ "The U.A.E. Has Been Secretly Carrying Out Attacks on Iran." *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 2026. <https://on.wsj.com/3QUbngh>

² "The Significance of UAE, Saudi Arabia Offensive Attacks in Iran War." *Newsweek*, 12 May 2026. <https://www.newsweek.com/the-significance-of-uae-saudi-arabia-offensive-attacks-in-iran-war-11943661>

³ "The BRICS Bloc Is a House of Cards." *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2026. <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-brics-bloc-is-a-house-of-cards-7d72dce7>