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Turkiye's BRICS bid: Strategic shift or diplomatic leverage?

Ankara's bid to join BRICS signals a potential shift toward multipolarity in its foreign policy priorities. Will Türkiye's membership be thwarted by its NATO allies, or is this merely a political play to nudge the west into opening its pursestrings?



(Photo

Credit: The Cradle)

NATO member Türkiye's [formal application](#) to join the BRICS group of emerging economies earlier this month has garnered widespread attention. While the Turkish Foreign Ministry and the Directorate of Communications have yet to officially confirm or deny the news, there have been several indirect confirmations from Turkish and Russian officials.

Omer Celik, a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), [couched his response](#) to reporters carefully:

Our president has stated at various times that we want to be a member [of BRICS] ... Our request on this issue is clear. This process is underway in this framework, but there is no concrete development on this.

Further [confirmation](#) of Turkiye's membership bid came from Yuri Ushakov, BRICS chair and Russian President Putin's foreign policy advisor, who has publicly stated:

Turkiye has applied for full membership. We will consider this application.

Turkiye's shift towards multipolarity

In addition, [Sputnik](#) reported that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to attend the BRICS summit in Kazan, scheduled for 22–24 September. This aligns with prior announcements that Erdogan would also attend the next Shanghai Cooperation Organization ([SCO](#)) meeting for heads of state.

These developments emphasize Ankara's interest in the multipolar order that BRICS represents, especially following its failed bids to join the EU, though Turkiye's official stance remains unclear – perhaps deliberately so.

The timing of Turkiye's potential BRICS membership raises important questions, especially given that this development follows an informal meeting with EU foreign ministers, marking Turkiye's first such invitation since 2019.

The BRICS acronym, [coined in 2001](#) by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill, originally described Brazil, Russia, India, and China. South Africa joined in 2010, transforming it into BRICS. As of 2024, additional countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have also joined the BRICS+ bloc, further [expanding its global reach](#).

BRICS aims to increase the voice of emerging economies in international affairs and challenge Atlanticist dominance over the global financial system. Though not a formal international organization like the UN or World Bank, BRICS has established the New Development Bank to provide loans for development projects in emerging economies. By the end of 2022, the bank had lent an astounding \$32 billion for new roads, bridges, railways, and water projects, although representing only half the \$72.8 billion committed by the World Bank in fiscal year 2023.

In its expanded form, the number of people living in BRICS countries is a hefty 3.5 billion, or 45 percent of the global population. The combined size of their economies is more than \$28.5 trillion, or about 28 per cent of the global economy. Combined, the expanded BRICS membership also produces about [44 percent](#) of the world's crude oil.

What about the west?

On the domestic front, Turkiye's internal politics are in flux. In the 31 March local elections, the ruling AKP lost a significant portion of its support for the first time in 20 years, largely due to ongoing economic crises.

In response, President Erdogan appointed [Mehmet Simsek](#) as his new finance minister, a figure known for his strong ties with western financial institutions, which some have interpreted as a shift back towards a pro-EU and pro-NATO foreign policy.

In a meeting at British think-tank [Chatham House](#) earlier this summer, Simsek reiterated that EU membership remains Turkiye's strategic goal and that the country would adhere to sanctions on Russia following the Ukraine invasion.

Simsek's rhetoric caused some unease in Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin's expected visit to Turkiye was canceled, and he [made his thoughts clear](#) at St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 5 June:

It seems to me that the Turkish government's economic bloc has recently focused on getting loans, making investments and receiving grants from western financial institutions. This is probably not a bad thing, but if it is connected with the restriction of trade and economic relations with Russia, then the Turkish economy will lose more than it gains. In my opinion, there is such a threat.

Meanwhile, the strain on Turkiye's relations with Russia continues. Turkish banks, reportedly restricting money transfers by companies engaged in shipping to Russia to comply with US sanctions, have led to a decline in trade between the two countries.

And as Putin warned, despite Turkiye's [participation](#) last month in an informal EU meeting of foreign ministers, Ankara has seen little progress regarding its requests for visa liberalization or updates to the customs union treaty with the EU.

Against this backdrop of strained relations with both the EU and Russia, Turkiye's application to BRICS may signify a recalibration of its foreign policy. Reports that Turkiye applied for BRICS membership, confirmed by Russia, suggests the country is seeking a new position in global diplomacy.

Strategic maneuver or economic gamble?

Notably, Turkiye's interest in BRICS is not new; it has been discussed since 2018. However, the different approaches within Turkiye's government – particularly between Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who supports BRICS membership, and Finance Minister Simsek, who appears more cautious – reflect internal divides on the issue.

Russia's confirmation of Turkiye's membership application ahead of Ankara's official announcement appears intended to challenge Simsek's pro-western stance. This situation

reveals the [lingering tension](#) between Ankara's ambitions to maintain a pro-western economic policy while potentially joining BRICS, a bloc spearheaded by Eurasian powers Russia and China.

From an economic perspective, BRICS could present opportunities for Turkiye, especially through access to loans and investments from the BRICS Development Bank. But Turkiye must also consider the limitations:

These include Ankara's trade imbalance with BRICS members, especially China, which is a concern. In 2023, Turkiye exported just \$3.5 billion to China, while importing \$45 billion, resulting in a significant trade deficit. In contrast, Turkiye's trade relations with the EU are far more balanced, with \$153 billion in exports and \$160 billion in imports during the same period.

Given that the west remains Turkiye's largest economic partner and primary source of credit, damaging these relationships could pose substantial risks. BRICS membership may reignite debates over Turkiye's geopolitical alignment, especially as a NATO member and EU candidate state. Though it is worth mentioning that western-allied Saudi Arabia and Egypt's accession into the BRICS club early this year did not appear to generate any fallout with Washington.

There is speculation that Erdogan could be using Ankara's BRICS application as a bargaining tool in negotiations with the west, particularly following the [US approval of F-16 fighter jets](#) to Turkiye.

Such a move could serve as leverage against embargoes, especially in the defense and technology sectors. The success of this strategy, however, hinges on how the west, particularly the US, responds to Turkiye's evolving foreign policy.

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