

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Is BRICS Plus Evolving Into a Quasi-Security Community?

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S*ummary*

The 'Will for Peace' naval exercises demonstrated China's capacity to convene diverse members around a shared security agenda.

The BRICS Plus multinational naval exercise ‘Will for Peace’ was conducted off South Africa’s Western Cape from 9 to 16 January 2026, with the participation of naval forces from South Africa, Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates and Iran. The exercise was led by China and was hosted by South Africa at the Simon’s Town naval base in Cape Town. During the exercise, China deployed units from its 48th Naval Task Force, including the guided-missile destroyer *CNS Tangshan* (122) and the supply ship *CNS Taihu* (889), along with a Z-9 ship-borne helicopter and several dozen special operations troops.

South Africa deployed its Valour-class frigate *SAS Amatola* (F145) and the Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Vessel *SAS King Adam Kok III* (P1573). Russia deployed the Steregushchiy-class corvette *RFS Stoikiy* (545) and the logistics vessel *Yelnya* from the Baltic fleet. Iran deployed multiple vessels, including the forward base ship *IRIS Makran* (441), the expeditionary base ship *IRIS Shahid Madhavi* (110-3) and the corvette *IRIS Naghdi* (82).

China’s role as the ‘lead coordinator’ for the exercise implied that it bore primary responsibility for both strategic planning and tactical execution of the drills. Described as a ‘BRICS Plus’ operation aimed at enhancing maritime safety, interoperability and protection of shipping lanes, the exercise drew international criticism, particularly from the United States. It also stirred speculations of China’s desire to normalise and institutionalise military cooperation within the BRICS Plus format, without formally declaring a military alliance or framing the bloc as a security-oriented ‘non-Western’ alliance.¹

Although the participating nations described the exercise as a routine maritime security operation, the exercise’s geopolitical context, live simulation of conflict scenarios, and the involvement of Russia and Iran, both heavily sanctioned and engaged in active conflicts, lent credence to the characterisation of the exercise as a naval war game.² The timing of the exercise also coincided with the violent Iranian crackdown on a mass civilian uprising aimed at fundamentally altering the nature of the Iranian government.³

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa expressly directed that the Iranian navy should not participate in the exercise. And yet, they did. Reports suggested a “blatant defiance” by the South African military leadership, prompting criticism from the opposition Democratic Alliance and calls to convene a parliamentary debate and a

¹ Paul Nantulya, “[China’s Military Footprint in Africa Deepens with PLA-led BRICS Naval Drills](#)”, Africa Center For Strategic Studies, 30 January 2026.

² Yashraj Sharma, “[BRICS Wargames: Why They Matter, Why India Opted Out](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 11 January 2026.

³ “[What Happened at the Protests in Iran?](#)”, Amnesty International, 26 January 2026.

judicial enquiry.⁴ Subsequently, President Ramaphosa established a Board of Enquiry to determine if his directives were willfully ignored.⁵ This marked the second time in six months that the South African military was accused of bypassing the President in its relations with Iran, following a controversial, unsanctioned visit to Tehran by the Army Chief in late 2025.

The credibility of the exercise was further undermined by the non-participation of India and Brazil, two founding members of the BRICS bloc. India explicitly distanced itself from the exercise, noting that the exercise was ‘entirely a South African initiative’ conducted outside the BRICS framework.⁶ Although the BRICS began as an economic coalition, the grouping is undergoing significant strategic evolution today.

The Will for Peace 2026 naval exercise was the first event that involved operational military coordination. It represented a manifestation of BRICS Plus as a geopolitical-military actor and has set a precedent for future naval, air, and possibly hybrid exercises.⁷ Joint multilateral naval exercises within the grouping are not uncommon. South Africa, China and Russia conducted Exercise Mosi in 2019 and 2023; India, Brazil and South Africa regularly conduct the IBSAMAR exercises, with the eighth edition held in October 2024.

However, the Will for Peace 2026 exercise represented the first time a multinational naval war game conducted under the BRICS Plus framework. South Africa’s joint task force commander has described the exercise as a “demonstration of collective resolve to work together”.⁸ It is indeed commendable to work together to maintain maritime peace and secure sea lanes of communications.

However, the optics of Iranian warships participating in an exercise organised by an African state dilute any claim of non-alignment and demonstrate political intent. The United States interpreted the exercise with scepticism as a strategic and political signal by the BRICS Plus grouping to reduce reliance on Western-led, global security systems. This undermines the argument that BRICS Plus is a pro-multilateralism development force, non-Western rather than anti-Western.

⁴ Ryan Smith MP-DA Spokesperson on International Relations and Cooperation, [**“DA Condemns Minister Lamola for DIRCO’s Defence of Exercise Will for Peace”**](#), *da.org.za*, 11 January 2026.

⁵ Peter Fabricius, [**“Motshekga Orders Inquiry Into Why Ramaphosa’s Orders to Withdraw Iranian Warships From Exercise Weren’t Obeyed”**](#), *Daily Maverick*, 16 January 2026.

⁶ [**“Official Spokesperson’s Response to Media Queries Regarding Comments Relating to India’s Non-participation in a So-called ‘BRICS Naval Exercise’”**](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 17 January 2026.

⁷ [**“From Economics to Power Projection: BRICS Plus Demonstrates Military Ambition in South African Waters”**](#), Robert Lansing Institute, 5 January 2026.

⁸ [**“South Africa Defends BRICS Naval Drills as ‘Essential’ Amid Tensions”**](#), *Al Jazeera*, 10 January 2026.

China’s Strategic Intent

If BRICS Plus evolves into a political-military pole in the emerging multipolar world, China stands to gain the most from such an arrangement. By conducting a multinational naval drill under the institutional umbrella of the BRICS Plus grouping, China demonstrated its capacity to convene diverse members around a shared security agenda. The naval exercises also represent an effort to expand Beijing’s military presence in Africa and co-opt African countries within its global security architecture. China was the leading advocate for expanding BRICS membership in 2024 and for adding prospective partners such as Malaysia, Thailand, Nigeria, Uganda, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Moreover, under the FOCAC’s Beijing Action Plan (2024–2027), there is a noticeable increase in military and security commitments, including joint exercises and the provision of professional military education to 6,500 African military and police personnel by 2027.⁹ China is actively promoting military and security cooperation through frameworks such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in African countries.

In 2024, the ‘Amani na Umoja’ (Peace and Unity) exercise with Tanzania and Mozambique represented the largest-ever PLA deployment in Africa, in which naval and air force strategic lift units were directly deployed from mainland China. In 2025, the PLA Air Force and Egyptian Air Force conducted the ‘Eagles of Civilisation’ drill, which was China’s first air force drill in Africa. Both these exercises demonstrated China’s growing power-projection capability and its ability to operate in the far seas. Between 2024 and 2025, the PLA Navy also made at least 15 port calls in Africa, exceeding all previous recorded visits.¹⁰ Ministerial-level law enforcement gatherings between China and African governments are also becoming more frequent.

From the Chinese perspective, the African continent has emerged as a “demonstration zone” for its GSI-linked initiatives. In this context, the Will for Peace 2026 naval exercise, spearheaded by China, signals an expansion beyond previous region-specific PLA exercises towards inter-regional coalition-building, a process pursued by Beijing at minimal risk without formally declaring the BRICS Plus as a military alliance.

⁹ Paul Nantulya, “[China Widening Its Influence in Africa Through Expanded Security Engagements](#)”, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 10 June 2025.

¹⁰ Paul Nantulya, “[China’s Military Footprint in Africa Deepens with PLA-led BRICS Naval Drills](#)”, no. 1.

Conclusion

The exercise supports the proposition that the foundational mandate of the BRICS bloc, focused on strengthening economic cooperation and reforming established financial institutions, is shifting towards greater security, defence and geopolitical alignment. However, this shift is unlikely to happen during India’s chairmanship of the BRICS in 2026 as New Delhi’s focus will be on strengthening economic/health resilience, accelerating digital public infrastructure (DPI) and artificial intelligence (AI), fostering green energy transitions, and promoting a “human-first” or people-centric approach as a voice for the Global South.

China, though, had a convening role in the ‘Will for Peace 2026’ naval exercise. As the lead nation, China designed the drills, simulated strikes, assumed command and control by providing the primary coordination infrastructure, and set the technical standards, with Chinese officials leading the opening ceremonies and technical exchanges.

Beijing’s effort to drive political and security coordination among BRICS Plus poses a challenge for India and African countries in exercising strategic autonomy amid geostrategic rivalries. If, in the future, the BRICS Plus grouping indicates a desire to shift towards deeper security alignment, India will have to make difficult choices. For now, it behoves India to continue pursuing principled pragmatism and multi-alignment in its foreign policy.

About the Author



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