

BRICS Expansion: Emerging of New Semi-Peripheries or Sub-Imperialism? A Comparative Analysis of Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa

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Abstract

The expansion of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) with the membership of Ethiopia in 2024 and partner countries of Nigeria and Uganda in 2025 requires a new debate about whether South Africa is the only semi-peripheral power in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). South Africa's leading role on the continent is being shaken up but does this represent the rise of new semi-peripheries in SSA? Could the growing number of BRICS members in SSA be the source of sub-imperialism or new semi-peripheries? This study suggests that despite the recent rise of its counterparts, South Africa is still the only semi-periphery in SSA.

Keywords

Sub-imperialism, modern world-system, semi-periphery, BRICS enlargement, South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria

Introduction

In terms of the concept of sub-imperialism and modern world-system (MWS) theory, the expansion and rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) marks important transformations. Following South Africa's accession to BRICS in 2011, discussions on the country's leading position in Africa gave way to debates on the nature of its sub-imperial power (Baran, 2024; Bond, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2022; Bond and Garcia, 2015; Finkeldey, 2018; Marini, 1972; Martin, 2013a; Shaw, 1978; Van der Merwe, 2016a, 2016b). Despite the reservations expressed regarding South Africa's inclusion in BRICS, given the country's perceived lack of alignment with the other members, its accession represented a significant milestone, as it became the sole representative of the continent within the group (Taylor, 2014: 17–19). The inclusion of Ethiopia

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in the BRICS group¹ in 2024 and Nigeria and Uganda's partner country status has prompted a re-evaluation of the notion that South Africa is the sole semi-peripheral power in SSA. Uganda became a partner country of BRICS but it is fairly behind Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa in terms of hegemony discussions or measurable demonstrations, such as GDP per capita or military power. The West and Central African regions of the continent are yet to be fully represented at the BRICS level.

This comparative case study aims to elucidate the expansion of the BRICS and its implications for the contemporary world system. The MWS framework is a valuable analytical tool for examining the role of intermediate powers within the global system, including Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa. However, the conceptualisation of the semi-periphery offers a different perspective on the primary research question of this study. The study was enhanced by the utilisation of empirical data from a range of international organisations, international financial institutions, development agencies and independent measurement companies. The World Bank, the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Global Firepower provide reliable data for measuring the selected cases' military power, economic power, trade goods and relations and human development. Furthermore, this study aims to review recent discussions on the evolving nature of the world system and the expansion of BRICS. Consequently, this study draws upon existing literature on the expansion of BRICS and its potential implications for Africa.

This study contributes to the ongoing debates in the academic literature on the concepts of 'sub-imperialism' and 'semi-periphery', with a particular focus on the expansion of the BRICS in Africa. Furthermore, this study considers whether the expansion of the BRICS, when viewed in conjunction with the crises of recent years, could potentially give rise to a new core for world politics. This study commences with an examination of the decision by the members of the BRICS grouping to expand in 2023. Subsequently, in 2024, Ethiopia and Egypt, both located in Africa, were incorporated into the BRICS membership alongside South Africa. Besides, Nigeria and Uganda became partner countries of the grouping in 2025.

All other members of the group outside of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can be defined as countries with semi-peripheral characteristics. How do countries in SSA, such as Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania, which have experienced notable economic growth in the 21st century, situate themselves within the MWS? In the context of North Africa, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt are regarded as semi-peripheral countries, as is South Africa in the sub-Saharan region. It is pertinent to inquire whether the emergence of new semi-peripheries in SSA is a possibility. What are the implications of Ethiopia's BRICS membership and Nigeria's partner country status? It would be reasonable to inquire whether BRICS could serve as an intermediary in the formation of new semi-peripheries.

It is possible that the growing number of BRICS member states in SSA may be the source of sub-imperialism. Does South Africa's sub-imperial role gain a new dimension with its BRICS membership, thereby setting an example for Ethiopia, a new member of the group? In a broader sense, could the growing divergence between the BRICS and the Western powers signal the emergence of a new core?

The introductory section of the study delineates the research questions and the criteria that were used to select the cases. The second section presents an analysis of the theoretical approaches to the concepts of semi-periphery and sub-imperialism. The third section situates the positions of selected cases from SSA within the MWS. The fourth section examines the comparative capabilities of each selected case in SSA and their specific regions. The fifth section will discuss the evolving nature of the MWS in the 21st century and will also explore alternative explanations of the expansion of

BRICS in world politics. Finally, the study will conclude with a brief discussion of the findings and will suggest theoretical considerations, a framework for future studies and policy implications.

Theoretical framework and locating cases in the MWS

Marxist theories and approaches have been more instrumental than traditional International Relations (IR) theories in moving beyond debates about ‘Eurocentrism’ (Hobson, 2011; Tansel, 2015). The theoretical frameworks of Immanuel Wallerstein’s MWS, Leon Trotsky’s Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) and the concept of sub-imperialism, particularly in relation to Africa and Latin America, which are also subjects of inquiry within the disciplines of IR and International Political Economy, are not the primary focus of debates surrounding ‘Eurocentrism’ (Trotsky, 2000, 2010; Wallerstein, 2004, 2011). For example, Goldfrank asserts that the World-System method is ‘a formidable synthesis of continental historicism, “Third World” radicalism, and Marxism’ (Goldfrank, 2000: 150). The MWS and UCD approaches are significant theoretical frameworks for understanding Africa, as they are not Eurocentric in nature. Building upon the tenets of dependency theory, MWS theory posits a substantial interconnection between colonialism and capitalism. The era spanning from the 15th century onwards marks the proliferation of capitalism across the globe, coinciding with the ascendance of colonialism. In the long 16th century, as conceptualised by Wallerstein (2011), capitalism began to assume a global identity through the establishment of extensive trade networks. The period of globalisation is regarded as the era during which capitalism proliferated on a global scale, encompassing social, economic and political realms. This study assumes that the capitalist world economy, which has existed for more than 500 years, represents the fundamental unit of analysis (Arrighi and Drangel, 1986; Chase-Dunn and Rubinson, 1977; Wallerstein, 2004, 2011).

The term ‘semi-periphery’ is used to describe regions that act as intermediaries in the unequal exchange between the core and the periphery, exhibiting characteristics of both extremes. In terms of the international division of labour, the countries of the core are in a favourable position in comparison to the periphery and semi-periphery. Because of this division of labour and unequal exchange, inequalities between the core and the periphery are gradually increasing. However, semi-peripheral countries occupy a position of intermediary powers that ensure the continuity of these relations. Semi-peripheral countries have an exploitative role ‘in conjunction with large corporations and financial funds. . .to exploit natural and energy resources’ of peripheries (Garcia, 2017: 501). In this regard, it also evokes the concept of sub-imperialism (Goldfrank, 2000: 169).

The concept of sub-imperialism, particularly in relation to South Africa, has been the subject of considerable debate in academic literature in recent times. For example, van der Merwe (2016b: 18) defines sub-imperialism as ‘the middle tier of global capital accumulation’ and argues that sub-imperial powers operate ‘inter-imperialist chains’ represent a set of interconnected linkages among ‘dominant blocs’ within the broader context of global capitalism (Van der Merwe, 2016b: 27). In other words, sub-imperialism can be defined as a middle layer that facilitates the penetration of imperialist powers attempting to disseminate the global capitalist system into regions where capitalism has not yet become fully established (Marini, 1972).

While some scholars contend that BRICS fosters South–South cooperation (Ban and Blyth 2013; Gray and Gills 2016; Gu et al. 2016; Zoccal Gomes and Esteves 2018) others argue that BRICS functions as a tool of sub-imperialism in the Global South (Bond, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2022; Finkeldey, 2018; Martin, 2013a). This study contends that BRICS does not elevate its members to the higher ranking of the MWS; rather, it engenders novel sub-imperial powers. According to Ban and Blyth (2013), BRICS was conceptualised as an institution to re-emphasise the role of the state in development and provide an alternative to the Washington Consensus (Ban and Blyth, 2013).

Furthermore, Sakwa (2019) asserts that the BRICS group is firmly embedded within the paradigm of sovereign internationalism (see also Mukherjee 2022), with its constituents exhibiting a progressive convergence towards the 'liberal internationalist model'. Conversely, Lagutina (2019) hypothesises that the BRICS could serve as the foundation 'for a new world order', which is a polycentric world order. The concept of a polycentric world order is predicated on the premise that a variety of geographical regions, characterised by distinct forms and types, function as the fundamental elements of this order (Lagutina, 2019).

Gu et al (2016) assert that BRICS materialises 'as a geopolitical association with systems for intellectual, policy and financial interaction and cooperation', thereby underscoring the significance of the BRICS as an institution. From the standpoint of social constructivism, Mielniczuk (2013) examines the evolving identities and converging interests of BRICS members. Gray and Gills (2016) regard BRICS as a component of the resurgence of South-South cooperation in the 21st century. Abdenur (2014) contends that the New Development Bank (NDB) legitimises 'China's multilateralism strategy'. Some studies evaluate the emergence of BRICS, either wholly or partially, in relation to the expansion of global capitalism and sub-imperialism. For example, Diko and Sempijja (2021) found that BRICS does not serve as a tool for the South-South cooperation, as each member of the grouping may have divergent ambitions in accordance with their foreign policy objectives. The present study aims to address a gap in the literature by undertaking a critical analysis of the recent expansion of member and partner countries by the BRICS, and by discussing this expansion through the lens of MWS theory and the concepts of sub-imperialism.

Bond (2015: 15) more directly thinks that BRICS 'contributes to global neoliberal regime maintenance'. South Africa assumed this role both during the apartheid era, when it was subject to economic sanctions, and after the end of apartheid. Taylor (2014: 3) posits that BRICS does not constitute an alternative to the prevailing capitalist core of the international system. Finkeldey (2018: 114) suggests that BRICS is a contemporary instrument of 'free trade imperialism'. This study indicates that the BRICS does not represent an alternative to the prevailing capitalist system. Accordingly, the concept of sub-imperialism posits that regional powers such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa serve as agents of the global capitalist system. China, too, stands to gain from this global capitalist system of trade and labour relations (Taylor, 2014: 120). Chase-Dunn and Rubinson (1977: 456) posit that the distinctions resulting from the international division of labour are reflected in the interstate system. The international division of labour and the inter-state system are the fundamental building blocks of the MWS. Africa is a continent situated at the periphery of the MWS, and it is home to a limited number of semi-peripheral countries. The next section will discuss methodological issues, case selection criteria and measurement methods for determining a country's position in the MWS.

Methodology: Measuring a country's position in the MWS

One of the most significant distinctions between peripheral and semi-peripheral countries is the restricted and undeveloped economic activities observed in the periphery. In semi-peripheral countries, there is a greater prevalence of economic activities that are similar to those observed in the core. Consequently, the periphery exhibits a less diversified economic structure than the core and semi-periphery (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 2016). In peripheral areas, the overwhelming majority of economic activities would be classified as peripheral activities. Nevertheless, this is not a requisite condition for core areas. It is also the case that core states engage in peripheral activities (Wallerstein, 1982: 93). In their analysis, Chase-Dunn and Rubinson (1977: 454) identified the MWS's primary structural feature as the 'division of labor between the emerging core areas producing manufactured goods and the emerging peripheral areas producing raw materials'. In light

of the evolving nature of the world system, this definition is no longer wholly applicable in the present era. Some core areas continue to produce manufactured goods, while some peripheral areas remain engaged in the production of raw materials. However, over the past five decades, the core has begun to diversify its output to include new types of high-tech products, such as software for computers, mobile phones and tablets. Furthermore, some emerging peripheral areas have witnessed an increase in the production of manufactured goods over the past five decades.

The question thus arises as to how the position of a country in the MWS can be calculated. The initial two indicators are GDP per capita and its sectoral distribution. The low-income aggregate of GDP per capita is indicative of countries with a peripheral economic profile, while the middle-income aggregate represents a semi-peripheral grouping. In peripheral countries, the primary economic activities are concentrated in the agricultural sector, with a notable output of raw materials. Conversely, semi-peripheral countries exhibit a combination of peripheral and core-like activities, including manufacturing, finance and high-tech industries. The vulnerability of the working class is significantly elevated in peripheral economies, whereas it is comparatively lower in semi-peripheral ones. The diversity of exported and imported products is another significant indicator, with a classification similar to that of GDP by sector, as previously outlined above. The Human Development Index (HDI) of the UNDP represents another facilitating calculation. A lower ranking of HDI is indicative of peripherality, while a higher ranking is indicative of semi-peripherality or core status. The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) are significant measurement tools that assess a country's governance quality, political stability, rule of law and accountability.

In accordance with the data provided by the World Bank (2025a), the GDP per capita of South Africa was \$6,022.5 in 2023. The GDP per capita in Ethiopia and Nigeria was considerably lower, at \$1,272.0 and \$1,596.6, respectively. The GDP per capita of other prominent economies of SSA, such as Angola, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are also important for the comparison with the selected cases (see Table 1). For an extended period, South Africa lagged behind Nigeria in terms of GDP. However, in 2023, the South African economy surpassed Nigeria's to become the largest in SSA. In 2023, South Africa's GDP was valued at \$380.7 billion. A comparative analysis of the sectoral allocation of GDP in three countries reveals that South Africa exhibits a lesser degree of dependence on agricultural activities than Ethiopia and Nigeria. Additionally, South Africa exhibits a greater reliance on the service sector than the other two cases (World Bank, 2025c). According to the economic complexity index of OEC (2025), South Africa ranks 59th, Kenya 87th, Ethiopia 98th, Uganda 105th, Tanzania 116th, Cote d'Ivoire 117th, Ghana 122nd, Angola 126th, Nigeria 127th and DRC 130th in terms of economic complexity trade data of 2022.

In 2023, the respective vulnerable employment rates in Ethiopia and Nigeria were 85% and 66%. The vulnerable employment rate in South Africa (11%) was considerably lower than that observed in both Nigeria and Ethiopia as well as the regional average for SSA (71%) in 2023 (World Bank, 2025b). The other seven cases have a percentage between 61 and 84, which are way above the rate of South Africa. The vulnerable employment rate indicates that Ethiopia and Nigeria are more susceptible to capital exploitation from the semi-periphery or core.

In a similar manner, Ethiopia and Nigeria are reliant on the capital of semi-periphery or core for the sale of their raw materials, as high-tech manufacturing is underdeveloped in the periphery. According to the OEC (2024a), Ethiopia's principal exports in 2022 were raw materials, including coffee, gold, cut flowers, vegetables and oil seeds. Conversely, the country's primary imports were wheat, refined petroleum, vaccines, palm oil and nitrogen fertilisers. While Nigeria's primary exports were derived from the oil and gas sectors, the country's principal imports in 2022 included refined petrol, wheat, automobiles, broadcasting equipment and vaccines (OEC, 2024b). In the same year, South Africa exported a range of commodities, including gold, platinum, coal briquettes

Table 1. Sectoral allocation of GDP in 10 largest economies of SSA.

Country	GDP (\$ billion) (2023)	Agriculture share in GDP industry (2023) (%)	Industry share in GDP (2023) (%)	Manufacturing share in GDP (2023) (%)	Services share in GDP (2023) (%)	GDP per capita (current US\$) (2023)
Angola	84.8	14.9	45.3	8.0	39.8	2,308.2
Cote d'Ivoire	78.9	14.4	23.9	14.4	54.6	2,530.8
DRC	66.4	17.4	46.5	18.0	33.5	627.5
Ethiopia	163.7	35.8	24.5	4.5	37.0	1,272.0
Ghana	76.4	21.1	29.5	11.2	42.5	2,260.3
Kenya	108	21.8	16.9	7.6	55.4	1,952.3
Nigeria	363.8	22.7	32.6	15.4	42.8	1,596.6
South Africa	380.7	2.6	24.6	13.0	62.6	6,022.5
Tanzania	79.1	23.7	28.0	8.4	28.7	1,224.5
Uganda	48.8	24.1	25.8	15.6	42.5	1,002.3

Source: Compiled by the author from the World Bank (2025a, 2025c) data.
SSA = sub-Saharan Africa; DRC = Democratic Republic of Congo.

Table 2. HDI, 2022 data.

Country	HDI value (2022)	HDI rank (2022)	Classification
Angola	0.591	150	Medium
Cote d'Ivoire	0.534	166	Low
DRC	0.481	180	Low
Ethiopia	0.492	176	Low
Ghana	0.602	145	Medium
Kenya	0.601	146	Medium
Nigeria	0.548	161	Low
South Africa	0.717	110	High
Tanzania	0.532	167	Low
Uganda	0.550	159	Medium

Source: Compiled by the author from UNDP data (UNDP, 2024).

HDI=human development index; DRC=Democratic Republic of Congo.

and automobiles, while importing refined petrol, automobiles, crude oil, motor vehicles and broadcasting equipment (OEC, 2024c). This shows that South Africa has a more diversified economy than Ethiopia and Nigeria.

The HDI data of the UNDP represent another measurement method for a country's position in the MWS. While South Africa was ranked high, at 110th place, Ethiopia and Nigeria were ranked low, at 176th and 161st places, respectively, in 2022 (see Table 2). Ethiopia's similar HDI value to that of the DRC is a cause for concern with regard to the country's development trajectory, and Nigeria is just below the medium rank. Angola, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda have been ranked as medium, but it should be noted that they are considerably less developed than South Africa in terms of HDI.

According to the WGI, Ghana and South Africa demonstrated the two most successful performances in selected cases in 2023 (see Table 3). Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania also exhibited superior performance in comparison to the majority of cases in 2023. However, the DRC was the least successful country in these cases, with Ethiopia and Nigeria also demonstrating poor performances in 2023. This finding indicates that South Africa has demonstrated better performance in comparison to the other two major regional powers, Ethiopia and Nigeria. The analysis highlights that Ethiopia and Nigeria face not only challenges related to regional stability but also domestic governance issues that are more pronounced than those experienced by South Africa.

The presented data in this section suggest that South Africa continues to occupy a semi-peripheral position, while Ethiopia and Nigeria and other selected cases in SSA lag significantly behind in terms of their peripheral status. It may be hypothesised that Ghana is a candidate for the semi-periphery in the long term; however, the members or partners of BRCIS+ other than South Africa are not yet in contention. Furthermore, the following section will examine Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa's global political influence with the help of additional data and an extensive literature review.

A comparison of Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of only two African countries that have not been colonised, with the exception of a brief period of Italian occupation before the Second World War. During the 1970s and 1980s,

Table 3. Worldwide governance indicators of 2023 (estimate).

Country	Control of corruption	Government effectiveness	Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism	Regulatory quality	Rule of law	Voice and accountability
Angola	-0.60	-1.00	-0.34	-0.76	-1.09	-0.73
DRC	-1.48	-1.68	-2.04	-1.40	-1.67	-1.21
Cote d'Ivoire	-0.31	-0.35	-0.63	-0.11	-0.46	-0.37
Ethiopia	-0.46	-0.76	-1.96	-1.02	-0.67	-1.06
Ghana	-0.09	-0.09	-0.02	-0.18	-0.09	0.41
Kenya	-0.77	-0.30	-0.93	-0.39	-0.32	-0.12
Nigeria	-1.04	-0.84	-1.76	-0.93	-0.88	-0.54
South Africa	-0.28	-0.25	-0.66	-0.22	0.08	0.74
Tanzania	-0.31	-0.45	-0.05	-0.58	-0.37	-0.53
Uganda	-1.04	-0.54	-0.69	-0.51	-0.47	-0.69

Source: Compiled by the author from the World Bank (2025d) data.

DRC=Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ethiopia had been an ally of the Soviet Union. Following the dissolution of numerous communist regimes on a global scale in 1991, a transformation occurred in Ethiopia. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front was established. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia through a referendum in 1993, and a border war between the two countries took place from 1998 to 2000. Following the improvement of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea under the leadership of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, the two countries coordinated a response to an insurgency in the Tigray region on the border.

The location of the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa serves to reinforce Ethiopia's significance in the realm of diplomatic affairs. Addis Ababa is widely regarded as a symbol of African independence, largely due to Ethiopia's historical status as a significant player on the global stage even before the independence movements in Africa. The country's economic and political power is not a determining factor in this regard; rather, it is the absence of colonial influence that lends it such significance. Ethiopia has made notable advancements in economic growth in the period following 2005 and currently ranks as one of the continent's largest economies. In terms of demographics, Ethiopia has the second largest population on the continent, after Nigeria. In military terms, Ethiopia, which has one of the largest armies on the continent, plays an active role in peacekeeping operations. Ethiopia deployed military forces in Somalia to achieve its foreign policy objectives and invaded the country between 2006 and 2009, but it was a 'failed intervention' (Yigzaw and Mengisteab, 2024). More recently, the Ethiopian army joined the AU Mission in Somalia in 2014 to support their peacekeeping efforts. Ethiopia has historically held a distinct advantage over its neighbouring countries, having been one of the three founding members of the UN from the African continent, alongside Egypt and South Africa (Woldemariam, 2018: 373). Despite Somali, Djibouti, Kenya and Sudan being among Ethiopia's most significant trading partners, the country's primary commercial relationships are established with overseas entities, including Saudi Arabia, the US, Germany, the UAE, the Netherlands, India and China (OEC, 2024a).

Despite its status as one of the most significant countries on the continent, Ethiopia faces a number of internal challenges that impede its development. These include ethnic conflicts, high poverty rates, rapid population growth, deficiencies in basic infrastructure, corruption, food

security concerns, a one-party political system and limited civil and political rights (Gebrewold, 2014: 5). Since the 1970s, Ethiopia has faced significant challenges, including prolonged periods of famine and drought. Furthermore, regional rivalry with Eritrea represents a significant obstacle to Ethiopia's progress. Moreover, Kenya represents Ethiopia's most significant competitor in the East African region with regard to regional leadership. From the north, the presence of Egypt serves to restrict Ethiopia's sphere of influence. The construction and subsequent commissioning of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have resulted in a deterioration in relations with Egypt and Sudan, who have expressed particular concern regarding the security of their water supply (BBC News, 2022). Ethiopia's dominance over the Nile River represents a significant strategic advantage, enabling the country to emerge as a regional power.

The post-2002 Ethiopian policy focused on regional issues is regarded as analogous to the 'Monroe Doctrine' (Le Gouriellec, 2018). The foreign policy in question involved direct intervention in civil unrest in Eritrea, South Sudan and Somalia, yet did not directly address conflicts outside the region. Furthermore, Ethiopia was a prominent African nation that provided substantial support to the US 'war on terror' strategy during this period, engaging in military operations against the jihadist terrorist group Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has been embroiled in civil conflict since 1991 (Woldemariam, 2018: 380). Such elements can be interpreted as policies that support Ethiopia's claims to be a regional power. In his analysis of the concept of hegemony as it relates to Ethiopia, Le Gouriellec (2018: 1062) posits that the country exhibits characteristics of a defective and corrupt hegemonic power. Ethiopia's actions within its region do not demonstrate a clear superiority, and therefore, it cannot be defined as a hegemon.

The absence of a coastline in Ethiopia precludes the possibility of the country becoming a significant maritime hub. The independence of Eritrea in 1993 resulted in Ethiopia losing its sole access to the sea through a landlocked territory. Despite the reduction in the importance of the country in terms of foreign trade resulting from instability in the surrounding countries (Djibouti, Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia and Sudan), Ethiopia is attempting to lease ports through neighbouring countries. Two seaports are located in Somaliland and Eritrea. However, the port in Somaliland is currently a recently leased site, while the port in Eritrea is a disputed post-1993 harbour.

Nigeria

Nigeria, which was previously a British colony, is the most populous country in Africa. Nigeria is a member of the Commonwealth, as is South Africa. During the apartheid era, Nigeria can be considered a leading political power on the African continent. However, this does not mean that it was a semi-periphery (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). Nigeria was a major power until the 1990s, opposing slavery, colonialism, apartheid and all forms of racial discrimination on the continent after its independence. From the 1960s onwards, Nigeria provided significant support to the struggle of blacks in South Africa against white minority rule (Olanrewaju and Nwozor, 2022: 11). However, with the termination of apartheid in South Africa, a novel political force emerged on the continent and assumed the political leadership of Africa.

Nigeria's large population, vibrant economy, Africa-centred foreign policy and active roles in the AU, the UN and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) contribute to its status as a regional power, with the country sometimes being described as a regional hegemonic power (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). Nigeria has achieved notable success in multilateral diplomacy, including its tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, its role in the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the AU, its support for peacekeeping operations, and its contributions to the effectiveness of ECOWAS as an active organisation (Kim,

2022: 233; Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016: 118). Despite a recent deceleration in growth, Nigeria remains the most important economic entity within the ECOWAS (Oshewolo et al., 2024). Nigeria's largest trade partners are from the overseas markets, namely, China, India, the US, Spain, the Netherlands, France and Belgium (OEC, 2024b).

Obi (2018: 311) argues that West Africa is Nigeria's beloved sub-region and therefore the pursuit of foreign policy objectives has been facilitated by the utilisation of ECOWAS as a strategic instrument. Nigeria's most significant regional competitors are Ghana, an English-speaking country, and Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal, which are French-speaking countries (Gebrewold, 2014: 12). Nevertheless, in terms of population and economic size, Nigeria is unparalleled in West Africa. The correlation between Nigeria's economic and military strength and the attributes of its politics and society is such that the two factors are inextricably linked (Kim, 2022: 226).

Nigeria, a significant military force in its region, has devoted considerable resources to fostering peace in neighbouring countries since the early 1990s (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016: 120). Nigeria intervened in some of the crises in West Africa such as Liberia (1990 and 2003 respectively), Sierra Leone (1997), Guinea Bissau (1999), Côte d'Ivoire (2003) and Mali (2013) as part of the ECOWAS peacekeeping missions (Adams and Ebegbulem, 2016: 97). France exerts considerable influence in West and Central Africa. However, the rising number of jihadist terrorist attacks in the Sahel region in recent years has contributed to the destabilisation and fragility of numerous countries in the region. The traditional French influence in the region has been supplanted by Russian influence through the Wagner Group, while Nigeria has also experienced a significant economic downturn over the past decade. Furthermore, the geopolitical transformation has also resulted in Nigeria's dominance in the region becoming less prominent. In recent years, Nigeria has been characterised by a number of negative factors, including insecurity, violence, poverty and corruption (Gebrewold, 2014: 7).

The internal challenges facing Nigeria represent a significant impediment to the country's overall development. Furthermore, the religious differences between the northern and southern regions of Nigeria have significant implications for the country's development. Nigeria's coastline has been identified as a significant asset, with the country's ports playing a pivotal role in facilitating economic growth during the 2000s. The southern cities have benefited more from these ports. The northern regions are experiencing an insurgency by Boko Haram and other jihadist terrorist groups. Since its independence, Nigeria has also witnessed the emergence of ethnic separatist movements, such as the Biafran movement during the late 1960s. There is a significant degree of competition between various actors with regard to the domination of oil resources (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). The domestic failure of Nigeria has been a significant contributing factor to the country's decline over the past decade (Obi, 2018: 313).

Nigeria is the most significant oil exporter on the continent and possesses the largest natural gas reserves. Nevertheless, the country is unable to utilise this potential due to the presence of domestic issues. Furthermore, the reliance on oil hinders the diversification of the economy. South Africa and Nigeria are not in direct competition with one another in terms of trade, as they export different products (Scholvin, 2018: 153). South Africa enjoys a significant competitive edge over Nigeria within the West African region, largely due to the sophistication of its private corporate sector (Scholvin, 2018: 153). Additionally, South Africa plays a more prominent role than other African countries in terms of economic and political influence. Unlike Nigeria, for instance, South Africa does not have a mono-sectoral economy (Kornegay and Naidu, 2019: 635). This kind of deficit gives rise to questions about Nigeria's status as a middle power in SSA and its capacity to exert normative influence which 'leaves us with a blurred status' (Kim, 2022: 230). Therefore, while Nigeria may be considered a middle power in terms of material capabilities, its normative, identity and systemic impact are insufficient to warrant such a classification (Kim, 2022: 236).

South Africa

South Africa is seen as the most important financial and production centre on the continent. Geographical advantages, the richness of underground resources, the type of colonialism or the late end of colonial rule can all be attributed to this development. South Africa is ‘a comparatively smallish medium-income semi-developed economy’ within the BRICS context (Kornegay and Naidu, 2019: 632). South Africa continues to demonstrate a considerable lead over other countries in Africa with regard to technological advancement. The automotive industry, the banking and financial sectors, and the mining industry are the first sectors that come to mind in this regard. South Africa represents the largest African investor on the continent, with its multinational companies playing a significant role in this regard (Olanrewaju and Nwozor, 2022: 19–20). In addition to economic development, the advancement of democratic liberty has also been a significant indicator of change in South Africa following the year 1994. Nevertheless, the adverse legacies of apartheid, particularly the income disparity between Black and White South Africans, poverty, unemployment and the inability to resolve certain infrastructure issues, have resulted in the country’s current situation being analogous to that of other African countries (Andreasson, 2001; Martin, 2013a, 2013b; McGowan, 1993).

South Africa’s peacekeeping efforts within the framework of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) were not infrequent after the end of apartheid. For example, South Africa intervened militarily in Lesotho after 1998 and in the DRC during the Congo wars after 1997 (Mlambo and Adetiba, 2020). SADC troops, led by the South African army, also intervened against jihadist terrorism in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, after 2021 (Bussotti and Coimbra, 2023). There was a failed South African military intervention in the Central African Republic in 2013. More recently, South African troops have been involved in peacekeeping efforts in eastern DRC to reduce the violence of the fighting between M23 rebels and the DRC army (Mandrup, 2024).

The filing of a criminal complaint against Israel by South Africa with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) represented the country’s final significant diplomatic initiative. The 17th Summit of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was held in Durban in 2011. The 2010 FIFA World Cup, South Africa’s admission to the G20 and hosting of its 2025 summit, its non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and its subsequent BRICS membership, as well as its role in the distribution of vaccines across the continent during the COVID-19 pandemic, all serve to illustrate South Africa’s efficacy in the realm of diplomacy (Smith, 2018). In addition to multilateral diplomacy, capital investments that have the potential to influence the rest of the continent or the presence of multinational companies based in South Africa can be regarded as intermediaries that facilitate the dissemination of global capitalism in Africa. Similarly, BRICS member countries engage with the African continent through the establishment of capitalist trade relations, in a manner analogous to that observed in Western countries.

As a sub-imperial power in SSA, South Africa has been the primary actor in the reinforcement of these relations (Amisi et al., 2015; Baran, 2024; Bond, 2013; Martin, 2013a). The sub-imperial role is more closely associated with the economic transnational power of the country in question. Carmody (2016) posits that South Africa is not a hegemonic power but rather an agent facilitating the expansion of capitalism in SSA. Similarly, Spies (2022: 206) argues that South Africa ‘has historically been the “superpower” of Africa’.

Are there any emerging semi-peripheries in SSA?

Nigeria and Ethiopia can be considered to occupy a position of relative peripherality within the context of SSA. Nigeria, situated to the west, and Ethiopia, located to the east, are significant

economic and political powerhouses. From a military standpoint, the most formidable armed forces in the SSA region are those of Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia, in that order. (Global Firepower, 2025). The evidence suggests that South Africa's representative leadership role for SSA within the BRICS grouping has not diminished in any way following the inclusion of Ethiopia in 2024. Indeed, there are indications that South Africa's representative leadership in BRICS will continue, thanks to Pretoria's recent active diplomatic activities. For instance, South Africa's active diplomatic engagement in the fight against Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu under international law, its proactive leadership within the SADC and the upcoming G20 summit in Johannesburg in 2025 represent significant diplomatic achievements for the nation. Conversely, the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS poses a substantial challenge for Nigeria, as it grapples with jihadist terrorist attacks in its region. The diplomatic activities of Nigeria and Ethiopia are largely confined to their respective regions. However, South Africa has demonstrated a greater degree of activity in matters pertaining to regions beyond southern Africa, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the country's economic and political strength.

The designation 'BRICS+' underscores the significance of the founding members. Thus, within the context of an intra-group hierarchy, South Africa would retain its position as the most prominent country in SSA. South Africa retains a commanding position in terms of military, geographical, diplomatic, economic and political power, which collectively surpasses that of all other countries in SSA. Nevertheless, Ethiopia and Nigeria have recently made noteworthy advancements, largely attributable to their regional influence. The purpose of this section is to provide a comparison of Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa in terms of their respective positions in the MWS. The following section will address the significance of the expansion and rise of the BRICS to global politics.

What is the meaning of the expansion of BRICS+ for the MWS?

The question of whether the expansion and rise of BRICS should be regarded as a political challenge to US-led Western hegemony remains a topic of debate (Ban and Blyth, 2013; Bond, 2022; Carmody, 2024; Diko and Sempijja, 2021; Kornegay and Naidu, 2019; Lagutina, 2019; Mukherjee, 2022; Van der Merwe, 2016a). There are significant discrepancies in opinion regarding a number of key issues, including the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the UN Security Council, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the Israeli-Gaza conflict, the International Criminal Court and the ICJ, between the West and BRICS. In addition to these political concerns, the capitalist world economy continues to exert a dominant influence on the existing global system. It is not feasible to conceptualise a complete separation between the West and the global South within this global economic system. The most significant indicator of this is interdependence; the BRICS members benefit from the existing world system. Taylor (2014: 12, 151) argued that BRICS has members who benefit from the existing global order. These members want to be involved in reshaping and stabilising the order for their own interests. Indeed, BRICS members do not have a real agenda for changing the world order.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has given rise to a new phase of conflict within the US-led coalition against Russia. Nevertheless, it is evident that Russia's material and soft power capabilities are insufficient to establish a new world order. China has been the most influential actor in the global South, particularly within the BRICS grouping. However, it does not represent an immediate threat to the prevailing liberal order. China's accession to the WTO was a strategic move that enhanced the country's economic and international trade prospects (Taylor, 2014: 116–117). Despite the objections from BRICS members towards the current international order, China is one of the countries that has benefited the most from the current system, as evidenced by its economic

development in the 21st century (Carmody, 2024: 10). Qobo and Soko (2015: 277) contend that although the BRICS represent a challenge to US hegemony, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that they are capable of assuming a leadership role in the current global system. Furthermore, they that the BRICS members should not seek to challenge US hegemony but rather contribute a new and distinct voice and influence to the global political landscape (Qobo and Soko, 2015: 282–283). Therefore, South Africa's invocation of international law against the Israeli government represents an effort to confront the West's apparent indifference to the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu during the Gaza War. In this regard, Pretoria is engaged in a struggle with several Western countries within a framework that embodies and safeguards liberal Western values, thereby illustrating a South Africa that is seeking intra-systemic rather than systemic transformation.

As an emerging bloc, the challenges that BRICS may pose to the current international system remain unclear. To illustrate, the NDB represents an attempt to establish an alternative economic regime. However, it remains unclear how effective this initiative is. In the absence of a definitive answer to this question, the significance of the NDB in establishing an alternative economic regime remains opaque (Nach and Ncwadi, 2024: 4). In addition to providing credit loans, the NDB serves as a mechanism for facilitating the use of local currencies among the BRICS members (Nach and Ncwadi, 2024: 4, 11–12). The formation of a currency union could prove an effective means of contesting the prevailing dominance of the West. The question thus arises as to whether they possess sufficient resources to challenge the dominance of the US dollar.

Acemoglu (2023) asserts that the expansion of BRICS has resulted in China and Russia possessing a greater number of allies. He further posits that this represents a missed opportunity for the new members of the grouping, given that the world requires a genuine alternative to the West and its rivals. He argues that the emerging economies of the global South should have established a presence in world politics, but that this presence should not be subsumed under the shadow of China. Besides, Ikenberry (2024) distinguishes between the world order and the West, the East (comprising China and Russia) and the global South. According to Ikenberry (2024: 119), the Russo–Ukrainian War marked a turning point in the separation of the Three Worlds. Ikenberry's (2024) Three Worlds distinction is seen by some as undermining the capacity of BRICS, given that eight members hail from the global South, alongside China and Russia, which represent the global East. Carmody (2024) proposes that BRICS+ represents a challenge to the West under the leadership of China and Russia. The BRICS' expansion is not only a sign of the rise of the global South but also a response to 'the expansion and deepening of US alliances' (Carmody, 2024: 11). Kutlay and Öniş (2024) put forth the proposition that the war in Ukraine serves to accentuate the geopolitical schism between the West and the global South. According to them, the global East is in a position of greater advantage than the global West in terms of receiving support from the global South (Kutlay and Öniş, 2024). This is exemplified by the South African case against the Israeli government, which occupies a position of proximity to both the Eastern bloc and the global South (Ikenberry, 2024: 124).

Moreover, in addition to the perspectives of the BRICS countries and the Western world, it is also crucial to consider the viewpoint of the African continent in this discussion. The emergence of the BRICS as the foremost trading partner of the African continent has prompted a shift in the geopolitical landscape, marking a notable decline in the influence of former colonial powers and the US. The BRICS's stance, often perceived as more favourable by African nations due to its members' lack of a historical background of African domination, has been a subject of analysis (Kornegay and Naidu, 2019; Shaw, 2015; Taylor, 2014). Additionally, the unconditional approach of BRICS members, particularly China, has garnered a positive response from the African continent (Alden, 2013; Alden et al., 2008; Asante, 2018; Naidu and Ampiah, 2008). The policies of

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, which are directed against their former colonial power France and its allies, and the welcoming of BRICS members and non-BRICS countries such as Turkey on the African continent by various African nations, have caused significant concerns for Western countries (Donelli, 2018).

In accordance with the MWS theory, the contemporary world system can be defined as a world economy. This implies that capitalism is the sole economic system that the MWS deems viable. In contrast to a world empire, a world economy does not necessitate the existence of a single political entity (Wallerstein, 2011). Goldfrank (2000: 167) asserts that the nature of world economies is antithetical to that of world empires as world economies constitutively 'are integrated through the market rather than by a single political centre'. However, with the advent of the 21st century, it can be posited that this hegemony has undergone a period of weakening due to a number of factors. These include the unsuccessful US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukraine since 2014, and the rise of China. The diversification of the economies of the BRICS countries represents a significant challenge for the emergence of a core within the MWS, in addition to the challenge of contesting the dominance of the US dollar (Nach and Ncwadi, 2024: 12). Current predictions indicate that China's GDP will exceed that of the US by the end of the 2020s, thereby attaining the status of the world's largest economy. Furthermore, some experts project that India will surpass the US' GDP by the mid-21st century (O'Neill, 2025). The original members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China and India) in conjunction with the G7 countries constitute 11 of the 12 largest economies in the world. It is anticipated that these four countries will ascend to a more elevated ranking in the future (O'Neill, 2025).

The question thus arises as to whether these challenges are sufficient to affect a complete transformation of the existing world system, or alternatively, to shift its core from the West to the global South. However, the situation remains such that the US leadership has not yet been completely overthrown. Despite the presence of political rivalries, the establishment of an alternative economic regime will not be achieved solely through the NDB or the weakening of the US dollar. The BRICS proposals can be interpreted as efforts to reform the global capitalist system. There is no indication that a transition from capitalism to a new economic system is underway. In this sense, the expansion of the BRICS grouping in SSA can be interpreted as an expansion of global capitalism through certain sub-imperial powers. As this research has argued, it is not possible to claim that new semi-peripheries in SSA emerged simultaneously with the expansion of BRICS in particular. The subsequent section is intended to provide a concise overview of the study's findings, accompanied by a series of theoretical considerations, the establishment of a framework for future studies and the identification of policy implications.

Conclusion

The formation of BRICS+ represents a significant change in both African and global politics. The expansion of BRICS may result in the emergence of new sub-imperial powers in Africa. The establishment of South Africa's semi-peripheral status occurred under the governance of a white minority. The increasing population and economic prowess of Ethiopia and Nigeria appear insufficient to propel them towards an elevated position within the MWS strata. There does not appear to be any upward mobility for the new BRICS member or partner countries from SSA, and in fact there is no such promise from the BRICS expansion. In the short term, Ethiopia's membership and Nigeria's partnership will bring them closer to other BRICS+ members and partners. However, the challenges faced by both countries in their respective regions will likely prevent them from achieving stability in the short term. With an uncertain future for ECOWAS in the Sahel region and

neighbours ruled by junta regimes as well as terrorist attacks, Nigeria is likely to face security and diplomatic challenges. For Ethiopia, the agreement reached with Somalia at the end of 2024 is of great importance for regional stabilisation. In the short term, the most significant uncertainties pertain to the status of Somaliland and the outcome of the ongoing civil war in Sudan. Furthermore, the challenges related to Egypt concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Somalia represent additional factors that erode regional stability. For both countries, the limited diversity of economic production and the absence of substantial improvements in quality of life are a matter of concern. A high degree of dependence on both the core and the semi-periphery is evident in these two countries. The findings of this study indicate that both countries remain on the periphery of the MWS.

With regard to the SSA region's most significant trading partners, it is evident that imports are predominantly influenced by BRICS+ countries, namely, China, India, South Africa and the UAE (WITS, 2025b). In terms of exports, China and India are followed by Western countries such as the US, the Netherlands and Switzerland. This observation underscores the reliance of sub-Saharan African countries on the capital of BRICS+ nations. Conversely, China's total trade volume with SSA is even smaller than that of the US and some neighbouring Asian countries, indicating that the BRICS' strongest nation is relatively less dependent on SSA in terms of trade (WITS, 2025a). Nevertheless, China's interests in Africa's mineral resources, its growing labour pool and its voting potential in international organisations still make SSA an important actor.

In accordance with the MWS theory, the degree of interdependence between peripheral countries and semi-peripheral or central countries is greater than the reverse. As this study has demonstrated, the significance of BRICS for African countries is greater than the importance of Africa for BRICS. Even if membership of BRICS+ does not lead to a fundamental change for African countries, it symbolically helps them to create a new option in their dependence on the West. The African continent has assumed an increasingly prominent role among the BRICS nations, primarily due to its rapidly expanding population, economic growth, vast mineral resources and significant voting potential within the UN General Assembly and other international organisations. For instance, the significance and diversity of the voting potential and preferences of African nations in bringing the Russian war against Ukraine to the UN General Assembly have been realised. Moreover, the critical earth minerals present in the African continent have been identified as a pivotal component in the production of electric vehicles and advanced technology. This has further contributed to the escalation of trade tensions between the US and China. In recent times, the African continent has emerged as a significant contributor to the global business sector, offering digital hubs that are poised to play a pivotal role in catalysing future technological advancements.

The dynamics of Africa's recent economic growth are often interpreted in the context of activities by rising powers within the continent. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, there has been a noticeable decline in Western countries' interest in Africa. In the 2000s, this shift was marked by the emergence of emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE and others, with China assuming a leadership role. Technological partnership, unconditional aid, direct investments and trade activities in SSA by China were instrumental in this transition. The diversification of donors, trade partners and diplomatic relations has proven advantageous for Africa in this relationship. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, BRICS members have collectively contributed to the provision of vaccines to the African continent. The Sub-Saharan countries, which had a pessimistic outlook in the 1990s, have become one of the most dynamic sub-regions of international politics in the 21st century. In order to enhance the long-term collaboration between African countries and the BRICS members, it is recommended that the reliance on the US dollar in trade be reduced and that cooperation with the NDB be considered as an alternative to international financial institutions such as the IMF

and the World Bank. These developments will be significant milestones in Africa's quest for an alternative to the West. However, they do not appear to signal a systemic change for the MWS.

The debate concerning the new world order is set to continue throughout the second quarter of the 21st century. It is hypothesised that regional blocs may prove more efficacious in the shaping of global influence. The expansion of BRICS in Africa may have some strategic importance for China or Russia, but its impact on world politics is likely to be limited. However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of Africa and the effects of this new world order on the continent, it is essential to read these issues in conjunction with the BRICS+ debate. Furthermore, the new studies will encompass discussions on additional partner countries and new members joining the BRICS in the course of further enlargement.

It may be necessary to conduct further discussions and implement updates to the MWS and sub-imperialism approaches. Although theoretical approaches such as dependency theory, MWS and sub-imperialism, which were introduced with the end of colonialism, remain valid today, it is imperative that their methods, data and ways of interpreting the world are constantly updated. Given the sudden and accelerated pace of change in the post-2020 era, there is a case for regular updates to ongoing debates.

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Note

1. After the expansion of BRICS with the inclusion of Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, the group is called BRICS+. In this study, therefore, BRICS+ means the expansion of BRICS.

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