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Implications of BRICS Expansion: BRICS Identity Change and Expansion into the MENA Region

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On January 1, 2024, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became members of the BRICS, a group of emerging powers in the global south. This paper analyzes the change in BRICS' identity, explains why BRICS qualified countries in the MENA (Middle East-North Africa) region as new members, and suggests countermeasures for the ROK.

Has the Identity of BRICS Changed?

The founding members of BRICS are the largest countries in terms of territory and population, have much higher economic growth rates than the developed countries, and are geographically located in the global south. BRICS' political identity was closer to democracy than authoritarianism in its early days. However, there isn't any country that officially became a member in 2024 that satisfies all the commonalities of large territories, large populations, rapid economic growth, and democratic political systems shared by the four founding members. The commonalities shared by the new five member countries are geographical location (the Middle East-North Africa) and authoritarian political systems.



Why Did BRICS Focus on ‘MENA’?

There are two reasons why BRICS gave membership to countries in the MENA region. The first reason can be found in the geopolitical importance of this region, the relative reduction of US influence in the Middle East, and the promotion of stability in South Asia. The Middle East and North Africa connect Europe and Asia geographically and is located between the Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean, making it a strategically important location. The Obama administration has implemented a “Pivot to Asia” strategy to keep China in check rather than the Middle East, and the Trump and Biden administrations are focusing on monitoring and constraining China. In addition, with the ‘Shale Revolution’ in the US in the 2010s, the importance of the MENA region in US foreign policy is gradually decreasing. The BRICS expansion into the MENA region can be viewed as an attempt by China and Russia, to fill the US power vacuum in the region. As important actors in the Middle East, China and Russia are actively attempting a strategic approach by taking advantage of the US negligence in the Middle East to prevent the formation of anti-China, anti-Russian, or pro-Western coalitions and exert influence on issues involving the Middle East. India has a strong intention to maintain friendly relations with Middle Eastern countries to prevent the spread of Islamic extremism to South Asia by improving relations with the Middle East and to monitor China’s expansion of influence in the region.

Second, the expansion of economic cooperation between the BRICS and the MENA region promoted the accession of countries in the region. Middle Eastern countries are important economic partners that provide oil, investment destinations, and export markets to China, Russia, and India. China and India, where industries are rapidly developing, are strengthening cooperation with the Middle East for stable oil imports, and Russia is using the Middle East as a supply chain base for receiving and exporting goods by circumventing sanctions after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.



Implications of BRICS Expansion for ROK

For South Korea, expanding BRICS influence in the region could have a negative impact on oil imports, trade, and investment. The acceptance of a US adversary, Iran, which has experience in developing nuclear weapons, into BRICS has made it difficult to completely rule out the possibility of cooperation between BRICS members and North Korea in the future. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation with countries in the region should be strengthened to prevent BRICS members from eroding oil, trade and investment opportunities in the region. Through economic integration, potential diplomatic and security conflicts must be minimized and cooperation made regarding the North Korean nuclear issue. Due to the lack of mutual understanding between South Korea and the MENA region, there is a possibility of mutual negative perceptions growing rapidly in case of an accidental event. In order to increase South Korea's soft power in the region, Korean culture (Korean Wave) should be spread using both online and offline channels. At the same time, programs, curriculum, and expert training to enhance understanding on Middle Eastern culture should be promoted in South Korea. In terms of the security strategy, the Red Sea, the Babal Mandev Strait, the Hormuz Strait, and Somalia's eastern coast, which are oil transport routes from the Middle East to South Korea, are very vulnerable to attacks by terrorists, pirates, and Iranian ships. Therefore, South Korea should pursue maritime security cooperation with countries with coastlines on the Arabian Sea and form a consensus that North Korea's nuclear weapon development could threaten the security of not only Northeast Asia but also across Eurasia. ©KINU 2024

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