Paige Montfort: Thank you so much. And hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us on this call today to preview the upcoming BRICS summit, to be held August 22nd through 24th in Johannesburg, South Africa. As our operator noted, my name is Paige Montfort. I’m the media relations manager here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – in Washington, D.C. And it’s a pleasure to have all of you with us.

I’m joined today by five terrific colleagues with expertise representing each of the five BRICS countries. And they are going to provide some initial remarks with their insights and analysis on the key themes and context, as well as their expectations for the summit. And then with the remaining time, we will go into Q&A from those of you who have dialed in. And so before we get started, I’d like to introduce our experts in the order in which they will be speaking.

First, we will hear from Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. He is the director of the CSIS Africa Program, and he’ll be starting out, of course, because South Africa is our host this year.

He will be followed by Brian Hart, who’s a fellow with our China Power Project.

And after Brian, we’ll hear from Katherine Hadda. She is a visiting fellow with our Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies. And she’s also a former U.S. consul general in Hyderabad, India.

And following Katherine, we’ll hear from Maria Snegovaya. She’s our senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia with our Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program here at CSIS.

And last but certainly not least, bringing us home to represent Brazil, we will have the director of our Americas Program, Ryan Berg.

And so just a reminder, there will be a transcript. No need to scribble furious notes throughout. We’ll be pushing that after directly to all of you who RSVPed, and then also publicly on the CSIS website. Without further ado, I’m going to hand it over to Mvemba to get us started.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you, Paige. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us. The BRICS summit, this one, the 15th of its kind, is happening next week in Johannesburg, in South Africa. For South Africa, the significance becomes because it comes right on the heel of the friction that we saw several weeks ago between the United States and South Africa, dealing with the allegation that South Africa was supporting Russia, given them material support; namely, weapons. This is the issue involving Lady R, Lady R being a Russia ship that was seen in South African waters and
supposedly taken weapons to Russia. There was also another event where a Russian plane that had been spotted in other conflict areas landed in South Africa, supposedly also picking up armaments to Russia. This was a serious point of tension between the United States and South Africa.

Following up on the vote of South Africa during the Ukraine resolution, the first U.N. Ukraine resolution, that caused a lot of friction between African countries and Western countries. Remember that African countries either abstained – some of them abstained to vote in favor of that resolution. I’m talking about the resolution back in August last year. And then some of those voted for, but a few others didn’t vote – voted against it, such as Eritrea. That was a shocker because people had expected in the West – that is, the West had expected that Africa would fully support the resolution at the United Nations. That showed that Africans had their own position. And chief among those leading these diplomatic positions was South Africa.

So part of the significance of South Africa hosting this BRICS summit is that it asserts South Africa’s position as the leader or one of the leaders – definitely an important leader – of the African bloc on the international stage, on the global stage. It also shows that South Africa remains, in my opinion, the most consequential economy on the continent. That’s how it got to become a member of the BRICS in the first place. It’s also strengthened the position of South Africa among non-aligned countries. Non-aligned countries have absolutely been at odds at least with Western countries, particularly ideologically because they do not want to align either with the Russians or with the United States and allies.

The other significance is that important leaders will be attending this from the BRICS. So Xi Jinping himself will be attending the summit, not only as part of the summit but also with a visit – an official visit to South Africa, which also will strengthen the way South Africa sees its position on the global stage. Narendra Modi of India will be there, as well as Luiz Inácio Lula. And we know that Putin, with the friction that had happened back in May – when it announced that President Vladimir Putin will attend the summit, there was a lot of friction and a lot of pressure put on South Africa to arrest him because of the international arrest warrant that had been issued to arrest President Putin. South Africa resisted that call and continued to insist that Vladimir Putin was welcome to attend the summit. We know, of course, that in July Russia announced that President Putin will not attend but will be represented by Lavrov.
So that comes up on how this plays with South Africa itself. In terms of what the agenda will be, I think South Africa is very – the leaders, at least, of South Africa are happy that they will be hosting this because the point on the agenda remains: How do we – the important point, really, that how does the Global South counterbalance the influence of the Global North, meaning the Europeans literally, and the United States’ interest? This will be discussing their disillusionment with U.S. leadership or at least the U.S.-led coalition around the world and how that world order is affecting adversely the countries of the Global South. This will be a time when they will be seeking an alternative to that power.

De-dollarization is one of the point that will be on the discussion agenda.

The expansion of the membership. But the expansion of memberships come with certain pressures and tensions between members themselves. So India, for instance, is very worried of what role China will play and maybe in taking over the entire platform to assert its own influence. So those local or regional parts are problems that are in other parts of the – of the world will come to play in here.

They will continue to discuss the concept of common currency – again, a point that South Africa is very eager to take on.

The situation in Ukraine will remain an important part of the discussion because, as we know, South Africa, India, and China have a position, the position pretty much to abstain in condemning Russia, whereas Brazil is on the other side of the equation.

Finally, the question also remains the question of interest, who is interested in joining. The fact that South Africa was an early member – South Africa, remember, joining in 2010, the year after the BRICS were created. At least, at the time it was called BRIC. So South Africa added the S in 2010. So they were quite an early member. Now we have 40 countries and 40 leaders attending this summit and expressing interest. On the African side, the fact that South Africa is there has also triggered interest on the part of Egypt, Algeria, and Nigeria.

In the case of Nigeria I think it’s important because even though, you know, mathematically, statistically, Nigeria is the largest economy on the continent, number-wise, but its influence is not the same. It’s lagging influence behind South Africa. That’s why I said early, South Africa remains the most consequential economy on the continent. And the fact that they’re hosting this gives them a boost.
I will stop there. Thank you very much, Paige. I will return it to you and will take questions in due time.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you.

And over to Brian Hart.

Brian Hart: Hi, everyone. Thanks for having me. And thanks, Mvemba, for those helpful remarks.

So in bringing the China angle to this, I kind of want to do three things. First of all, provide some background on how Beijing views BRICS, especially from a geopolitical lens. Second, I'll touch on some of the recent developments that I think will color the gathering from China's perspective. And then finally, I'll touch on what I expect from China at the summit.

So starting off, Beijing views BRICS as a very unique venue for expanding its influence globally. In July, Foreign Minister Wang Yi described BRICS as the most important platform for cooperation among emerging markets and developing countries. And there’s a reason – a couple reasons why, I think, Beijing views BRICS as an important venue for them.

If you think about, you know, China's position on other major multilateral groupings, BRICS really stands out. So, I mean, at the G-20, for example, I think that China experts note that the G-20 is largely dominated by the United States and its allies. Another major grouping is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which, you know, China is a founding member of, and very influential within. But, you know, the SCO is very limited geographically. It’s limited to Eurasia. And so it doesn’t have that kind of global reach that BRICS does. And, you know, so BRICS is really the only major mechanism for emerging economies that has a global reach, and that really brings, you know, the most important, strategically, players together.

And China has, you know, considerable heft and influence within the group. China alone accounts for about 70 percent of the group's total GDP. So that gives China a lot of sway, especially, I think, on economic matters, to shape some of the conversations within the grouping. And I think it also serves a good opportunity, from Beijing’s perspective, to cast itself as kind of the champion or the vanguard of the developing world and the global south. You know, that’s a mantle that they want to take up. I would note that I think that’s also a mantle that India is also keen to kind of play itself as. And so there’s a little bit of friction there that I’ll touch on a bit later.
You know, despite all of that, I think the grouping has several limitations, from China’s perspective. Chinese experts have recently noted that the group’s members have really different, disparate views on the issues, which makes it difficult to work in lockstep on some things. China experts have specifically flagged that BRICS is disadvantaged compared to the G-7, which has, you know, from their perspective, really strong capability to shape global discourse. And that means that the G-7 is largely in lockstep with the United States on many key issues. So that really makes it easier for them to project their power together.

That largely stems from the fact that G-7 economies are all liberal democracies. And so they kind of share that similar worldview. While BRICS is, obviously, comprised of, you know, a mixture of democratic and authoritarian members. From China’s perspective, India is a particular challenge. You know, the two countries have had several tense and dangerous standoffs on the contested border in recent years. And India has taken steps both domestically and abroad, I think, to try to blunt Chinese influence across different sectors. But, you know, there are signs that Beijing is looking to improve relations with India. That I think there’s been a bit of a thaw in tensions. And, you know, if that pans out and does – tensions do kind of ease there for a while, I think that essentially offers China better chances of working within BRICS with India to promote its agenda.

Finally, one kind of big challenge for China within BRICS is if you look at recent polling data from organizations like Pew, I know that polling data in some of these countries can be a little bit challenging, but the data that we have shows worsening views of China in many of these BRICS countries. That’s especially the case in India and Brazil. And, you know, that won’t necessarily have a huge impact, but I think it does potentially color how those country leaders may engage with Beijing on certain issues, especially sensitive issues.

Moving onto some of the specific recent developments that I think will have kind of a coloring effect on the meetings here, there’ll be a bit of a visible shadow hanging over the most influential members of BRICS, which is China and Russia. You know, first China faces mounting economic headwinds at home. The last week in particular has been, you know, full of bad news about the Chinese economy. China announced that it will stop publishing data on youth employment, you know, as those trends have worsened rapidly in the last couple of months. And there are growing signs of strain within China’s financial sector. You know, that all weighs, I think, on Xi Jinping’s ability to cast China as this
model of both economic prosperity and stability as it looks to, you know, be a model to other developing countries.

Second, former Foreign Minister Qin Gang, his disappearance has been visible, I think, in these preparations for the BRICS summit in recent months. Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu attended two BRICS meetings that would otherwise have been attended by the Foreign Minister Qin Gang, at the time. You know, so that lingering intrigue over Qin Gang's disappearance, I think it left an – you know, I'm sure it has left, to some extent, an impression on the BRICS countries about a bit of the instability that can take place within Beijing's black box of political intrigue. So I think that that maybe has had some impact in recent months.

And then finally, I think as Mvemba noted, you know, Vladimir Putin won't be attending, due to the arrest warrant out for him from the ICC. That, I think, won't have a major impact, from Beijing's perspective, but I do think it potentially casts an unwelcome spotlight internationally on China's increasingly close relationship with Russia.

And then, you know, the last part of my comments I'll touch on, you know, what I think to expect from China at the summit. First, China will push for expansion of key members. I think we've seen growing signs and statements from Beijing that they definitely want to see BRICS expand. You know, from their perspective, expanding the BRICS to include other developing countries will give China more of an opportunity to project its power and influence in key regions. I think that's especially true for the Middle East, Africa, and, to some extent, Latin America as well.

And we're seeing some signs that China's making progress behind the scenes on this front. In July, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar. And the readout from their meetings say that the two sides agreed and reached a principled consensus on launching the progress of BRICS membership expansion. So, you know, if that's a sign that they've come to some agreement, I think that it does indicate that there is likely to be some progress on this front. I could give you – now, I'm not the India expert here, so I won't speak to India. But I do think it suggests India is coming around to some of the viewpoints of Beijing. And that may suggest that there will be movement on this front.

Next up, China I think will certainly try to make its case against the United States and its allies on key issues during the summit. On this front, I think BRICS members will have – be receptive to some degree. For example, if you look at the communique from the recent BRICS
foreign ministers’ meeting, the group empathized their opposition to unilateral economic measures, like sanctions. That’s something that China and Russia, in particular, are focused on in terms of their rivalry and contest with the United States. And so Beijing looks to BRICS as an opportunity to gain some leverage globally in pushing back against the U.S. on those fronts.

And then finally, as Mvemba noted, this is taking place not just at the BRICS summit alone, but for China this is an opportunity to advance relations with South Africa and Africa more broadly. So, you know, on the sidelines Xi Jinping will pay a state visit to South Africa. And you know, they will be marking the 25th anniversary of establishment of relations between the two countries. And Xi will be co-chairing the China-Africa Leaders’ Dialogue with South African President Ramaphosa. So I think from Beijing’s perspective this isn’t just about the BRICS summit; it will also be a good opportunity for them to, you know, further increase their presence on the continent.

And with that, I think I’ll wrap up. But I’m happy to touch on other issues in questions. Thanks.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you, Brian.

And over to Katherine Hadda.

Katherine B. Hadda: Thanks very much. It’s very good to be here today.

So in many ways, when I’m going over India’s interest in the BRICS they seem almost diametrically opposed to China’s, maybe not that surprisingly. And I’ll explain what that means and, first of all, just go over what India’s interests in the BRICS are, that have probably remained pretty much the same since the countries first came together as a group at the leaders level in 2009.

And principally, that would be the desire to make it very clear that India has a proud tradition of independent foreign policy that it wants to maintain, and that includes on the security and economic fronts. And we see that, for example, with the import of Russian oil in the – in the wake of the Ukrainian invasion and an abstention on the sanctions – I mean, the condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the U.N. Security Council last year that Mvemba was referencing. And there’s also a desire for India, as was also mentioned before, to be a standard bearer for the Global South. And all that remains very important to India.

But there’s a lot in the world that’s changed and there’s a lot in India that’s changed since 2009, especially since Prime Minister Modi was
elected in 2014. And notably, that includes India’s desired trajectory towards a more – placing a more – having more influence on the global stage, and also to be – just to ensure its own economic development and prosperity.

But behind all that, and as has also been noted by Brian, is that, you know, they have very tense relationships with China right now. And that includes not only the border tensions, but also, you know, discomfort about China’s what seems malign behavior, you know, in some neighbors of India, such as Sri Lanka/Pakistan, and then also even on the global stage, again, sort of threatening that role that India has as being the standard bearer for the Global South.

But also there on the economic side, you know, since COVID especially, I think there’s been a realization and discomfort in India about India’s economic dependence on China, especially for things like APIs for pharmaceutical manufacturing. And in fact, last year India’s trade deficit, despite all the tensions, actually increased with China. And so, you know, it remains a serious source of concern.

And because of these worries over China and also, you know, India’s desire for better economic development, India, you know, while it remains the standard bearer for the Global South, has definitely taken more of a tilt towards the Global North over these years in its dealings with us – you know, the United States, with Western Europe, Japan, and Australia. And that would be through measures like the Quad, which isn’t officially a defense grouping but definitely, you know, has security aspects to it as a – as a primary feature; through the FTA – the free trade agreement with Australia; and through its participation in the Biden administration’s signature economic regional initiative of IPEF, even though India’s not participating in the trade theater of that.

So that’s the – you know, India’s continued participation in BRICS does serve several purpose(s). As I said, it maintains their public show of independence from the West, including in their ties to Russia, and maintains their role as the standard bearer. And it also avoids giving an opportunity for Russia and China to draw closer together at India’s expense. That’s going to be behind a lot of India’s rationale, I believe, in participating in this grouping.

At the same time, though, given the increased trajectory towards the integration with the Global North, India’s going to be very unlikely to support any key proposal that’s going to really be too uncomfortable for the United States or our allies. And that includes, you know, both because of the worries about China and the worries about us, India’s definitely lukewarm, to put it mildly, on the idea of a single currency.
It’s not that India wouldn’t like to see a convertible rupee, but that is going to be some time away. There’s no – they’re nowhere near ready for a convertible rupee. And I don’t even think, for example, Russia, which got paid in rupees for its oil, would want to see a convertible, you know, rupee. It doesn’t do much for a lot of the world to have that. And so – but mostly, India would worry about the influence of the yen, just like the development bank – the BRICS Development Bank up until now, you know, has primarily issued Chinese currency loans. Again, India would not see that in their interest.

And as for new members, you know, I take Brian’s point about the statement that India will be supporting, you know, kind of in principle. But the process alone, you know, it could be a formidable one. I think India’s really indicated that there needs to be a serious vetting process for this. And one can imagine that in India’s mind that will include maintaining some kind of balance in BRICS so that it doesn’t tilt too much to China’s influence.

And I would say, you know, from India’s point of view – you know, BRICS is a consensus organization, and I would think that India’s point of view is it actually has some pretty good negotiating strengths on this round of the summit. One is that, you know, unlike China, India’s economy is growing quite well. And you know, they just – you know, they have alternate partnerships that the BRICS members, especially China and Russia right now, do not have, you know, for example with the United States and other regional partners that I mentioned.

So for all those reasons, I think China – India will be pretty assertive in representing its interests. And what I would predict as the end result of the BRICS summit would be something – you know, a statement much as the one that came out last year, which was largely aspirational and not a lot of meat on the bones.

So I’ll turn over the microphone now to Maria. Thank you.

Maria Snegovaya: Thank you. Good afternoon/good morning, everyone. Maria here with Russia.

So it’s not a – it’s not a secret to anybody that BRICS has historically been a very problematic alliance. I think my colleagues have already highlighted that aspect. And Jim O’Neill – most people will know him from lead at the – Goldman Sachs, who framed – coined the term BRICS, he actually recently came on record saying that BRICS has never been able to achieve any success in its activities since its – since the start.
I have – will challenge that assumption from the Russian perspective a little bit. Where I seem to agree with O’Neill is the economic dimension, and I think that also aligns with what previous speakers have said.

First of all, the countries are quite diverse and they have really different agendas, as we see, in terms of their export-import orientation, in terms of the shares their respective economies occupy in the global GDP. Most importantly, these are developing or not fully developed economies, which is one of the reasons, as Katy has pointed out, that, for example, common currency certainly has no chance to stand or to be created any time soon. It’s not that we’re not even talking about the common currency; Russia – from the Russian perspective, the effort to sell its oil to corresponding countries using their local currencies as an alternative to dollar or euro have not been really successful recently, because many of these local currencies are not fully convertible, right? We are talking about India and China. And this is where the issues are at. We’re not even talking about the comprehensive endeavor of creating a global – this common currency for these countries.

There’s similar failures to create a separate central bank for these countries, again, just because of the discrepancies that are economically very hard to overcome.

Last but not least, the most, I think, ironic news was that the New Development Bank, which was created by the BRICS member countries, has recently announced that it is abandoning new investment projects in Russia due to sanctions. So, so much for economic breakthrough and achieving the – for the interaction and cooperation within BRICS as it officially stated as one of the goals of this alliance.

However, along with the economic goals, there are political goals, where I think Russia believes those are much more achievable and those may be simplified through the BRICS alliance. In particular, the alliance is important for Russia but also for other members of BRICS – and I think it’s been pointed out by previous speakers Katy and Brian – as a sort of counterbalance to what these participants – BRICS participants see, a world dominated by the U.S. and its allies. And Russia certainly is one of the main drivers of this process, and this is where I see – I think it unites – its interest unites with China at the very least. And of course, strategically in this environment where Russia is isolated increasingly and its position – its war in Ukraine and this global fight against Europe’s hegemony or NATO hegemony, this alliance is very important. And we see that, to an extent, there is a success in positioning it as an alternative to G-7, for example, based on the number of interested applicants who – the countries that applied to join or mentioned the possibility of joining BRICS. We are talking about – of about 18 countries
that are possible candidates, and certainly BRICS members claim –
BRICS members claim that there are much more – many more countries
that are willing to apply.

Certainly, Russia will try to use it in its propaganda effort, trying to
promote Russia’s stake on Ukraine, especially in light of the Ukraine-led
summit in Jeddah, which focused in particular on outreach to Global
South and finding a peaceful – as it were, finding a peaceful end to
Russia’s war against Ukraine. So this will be – especially given their high
number of attendees of this event, this will be certainly used by Sergey
Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of Russia who represents Russia, here
as an effort to kind of present an alternative, Russian vision of this
situation.

Importantly, in South Africa Russia’s propaganda effort has been quite
successful. The information that they spread is very actively promoted
in particular through social media. So in general, one can say it’s a
favorable environment for Russia to present its view.

Second, within the same framework of presenting, of shaping/forming
an alternative to the Western-led alliance, of course – and this is where I
agree with Brian – an effort to use this bloc and expand it by increasing
the number of members. Russia, for example, has been on record
discussing the possibility of membership for Iran. Again, is beneficial for
Russia as presenting itself as actually leading this effort in countering
the United States’ hegemony. Now, to what extent – from a propaganda
perspective, from the picture that Russia wants to show, it certainly will
be using the summit in that regard.

Now, where Russia is going to be less successful – and there are early
signs of that – is that, of course, BRICS, despite all this rhetoric of, like,
being the alternative to the Western hegemony, certainly are following
the general trend. And the very fact that Putin, for example, did not
come to South Africa is very telling. Putin, of course, is very afraid that
he might be arrested in South Africa. And for a reason – for example,
South African Republic Vice (sic; Deputy) President Mashatile
mentioned that they’d be happy if Putin did not travel – (laughs) – to the
summit. So, so much for the peaceful preparation and engagement and
increase of partnership between the countries. Similarly, the U.N.’s
represented at the summit, which I think is important, potentially
thinking about the outcome, because the U.N. is, obviously, not
supportive of the Russian viewpoint in this war.

We also know that China, India, and South Africa, while abstained from
condemning Russia’s invasion, in general some polls have shown that
their societies are not very supportive of Russia. Brazil, in contrast, has
actually formally voted to condemn it. So that certainly will be constraining Russian effort to promote its further push its soft power within that group of countries. Again, the heterogeneity of these countries may actually be helpful in that regard for the West, not work in Russia’s favor.

But last and not the least, of course, there are also reasons why Russia may be of interest to many of these countries. For example, South Africans want potentially money, investment from Russia in multiple projects. There is still quite an active economic cooperation unraveling between Russia and some South African companies and societies. India continues to buy arms from Russia, even if it has been moving away towards U.S. and France in recent years. So that’s essentially a situation in progress, where certainly participants expect certain benefits from each other during their participation, well – while, as I agree – and here’s where I agree with the previous speakers – I don’t think we’re likely to see some major breakthrough in that regard.

And I’ll stop here. Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Maria.

And over to Ryan Berg to round us out.

Ryan C. Berg: Thank you very much, Paige. Thanks, everyone, for tuning in today. And thanks to my colleagues for their wonderful insights on the other countries participating in the upcoming summit in Johannesburg, South Africa.

I’ll cover the Brazil angle. And I think the point to be made here is that despite many people commenting, including Jim O’Neill, that the BRICS grouping doesn’t make much sense in terms of the country grouping or it hasn’t achieved that much in terms of tangible accomplishments, Brazil sees the BRICS as an important part of its overall foreign policy. Why? I think that’s principally because Brazil’s foreign policy is guided by two main tenets.

The first is an attempt to build a greater space for its own strategic autonomy, particularly autonomy from Washington, as the latter is the most important power in the Western Hemisphere. Brazil has always sought ways to find its own realm of strategic autonomy, and I would call it autonomy within limits. Brazil is a very – is on a very firm understanding that, with the United States in its own hemisphere, there’s only so much autonomy it can build for itself on certain issues. The BRICS is an important part of that overall broad foreign policy goal.
Secondly, I would say that the BRICS is, for Brazil, the most important grouping heralding the coming age of multipolarity – a coming age that Brazil repeatedly says in its foreign policy statements that it welcomes, and which it says its foreign policy is working to bring about. Lula – President Lula sees Brazil as the leading country in Latin America, and he also sees Latin America as leading a new type of foreign policy doctrine. Some Brazilian diplomats have called this active nonalignment, or ANA. I think it’s important to note that active nonalignment is different from its traditional Cold War brother of traditional nonalignment. It’s more interest-based. It’s more issue-based than traditional nonalignment. It seeks to take each issue on its own merits. And it believes that neutrality in certain important global issues, such as Russia’ invasion of Ukraine, will bring greater attention to regions of the world that are otherwise neglected or neglected countries, and one of those regions that Lula often comments on is Latin America. So many of the BRICS countries have focused on this type of independent or non-aligned foreign policy. It’s a grouping that makes sense for Brazil in that sense.

I would say that BRICS fits soundly within Brazil’s overall approach to the world since its re-democratization in 1985 as well. There’s a story, perhaps an apocryphal story, of Charles de Gaulle getting quite frustrated with a Brazilian diplomat. And he storms out of a room, and he mutters under his breath that Brazil is not a serious country. Now, irrespective of whether that story every happened or if the story is apocryphal, Brazil’s foreign policy in many ways I think can be interpreted as an attempt to present itself to the world as a serious country.

And what do serious countries do on the global stage? They join major organizations like the BRICS. They join the OECD, which Brazil aspires to do. They aim to have relations with all the world’s major powers. And they aim to resolve intractable global challenges, such as when Brazil inserted itself in 2009 and 2010 into – much to the U.S. chagrin – into the Iran nuclear crisis. And since earlier this year, when Brazil inserted itself into the war in Ukraine, claiming that it had the capacity to lead a so-called Peace Club of countries to negotiate an end to the war.

So I think BRICS, for Brazil, sits very squarely within the foreign policy of the country, but especially the foreign policy of President Lula. In his third term, he has emphasized, quote, “Brazil is back.” And what he means by that is its period of self-imposed isolation, what Lula thought was a self-imposed isolation under President Jair Bolsonaro, where Brazil aligned much more closely with the United States, sought to distance some of its partners in the global south, that that period of
Brazil’s foreign policy is over. And Brazil is going to reassert itself on the global stage.

Lula personally has a lot of sway within the global south, which has its origins in his first two terms as president from 2002 to 2010. And so BRICS is just one of those avenues of personal influence for Lula himself. Outside of the BRICS, he’s maintained an incredibly grueling and intense travel schedule in his first eight months in office. He’s had several trips to Europe, to Africa, the U.S., and, of course, to China.

And so even in a world where Russia has invaded Ukraine, violated its sovereignty, and is accused of crimes against humanity, China stands accused of supporting, at least implicitly, that invasion. Now South Africa, as Mvemba mentioned, tensions with the U.S., claiming that it’s supporting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Brazil welcomes the ability to get regular meetings with all these powers. And BRICS provides it with that opportunity.

Now, on the question of expansion, which is one of the major questions of the upcoming summit, there’s an interesting divergence in Brazilian foreign policy. Which is to say, Lula wants it personally. Itamaraty, which is the foreign ministry in Brazil, doesn’t want it. You know, I think this shows in many ways the perils of Brazil’s presidential diplomacy. Expansion fits very squarely within Lula’s message of Brazil is back, and that the BRICS is this incredibly important institution to herald the rise of Brazil onto the world stage. Brazil’s foreign ministry, on the other hand, is against it because, frankly, they’re afraid of watering down the benefits of membership through expansion.

I think we should also be clear about some of the countries that have applied for membership. Let’s be clear about those countries. Some of them are countries that nobody should want to hitch their wagons to, at least not the Latin American applicants. Venezuela and Argentina – (laughs) – two countries with absolutely cratering economies. And one country, Venezuela, with very difficult democracy issues. One of the countries of the BRICS has already invaded a sovereign nation. Does the BRICS really want to invite a country that’s been – another country that’s been accused of committing crimes against humanity? Probably not. So there’s this tension even within Brazil, much less to say within the BRICS grouping, about how to approach the question of expansion. There’s a difference between the president and his foreign ministry.

I think one thing – switching gears slightly – one thing that we may hear about, which my colleagues haven’t touched on yet, is the new development bank, or the BRICS Bank. That could be part of the discussion, how to expand it and its global influence, especially at a time
when China’s lending has been under the microscope and receiving greater scrutiny as countries need that relief and China shows itself reticent to provide it. And I think this is a discussion in particular that Brazil might push forward because former President Dilma Rousseff, Lula’s successor, is now the president of the BRICS Bank. So that could be part of a conversation that the Brazilian delegation pushes forward in Johannesburg.

Now in terms of things to watch for, like my colleagues, I think that the statement or the communique at the end of the summit will be very aspirational. It won’t be full of tangible agreements or accomplishments. But there are some areas where I think we may have interesting statements and discussion. So a few things to watch for.

Are there any comments on Russia’s withdrawal from the grain deal, particularly because Brazil is a large agricultural power that has positioned itself to provide the world with greater food security in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine?

Is there any statement or consensus on a BRICS currency? Lula has been on a diplomatic world tour, where in every stop in the global south he seems to mention his desire to move away from dollar dominance and move into doing trade in other types of currencies. Brazil recently signed a swap deal in yuan with China. It’s another part of Lula’s attempt to build greater strategic autonomy. He’s gone so far as to say he wakes up in the middle of the night with nightmares because the world has to trade in U.S. dollars. Now, folks, I don’t know what kind of dreams and nightmares you have, but this is a very interesting and particular one for Lulu to admit to.

Third, whether there’s any agreement on the induction of new members and BRICS expansion.

And, fourth, any comments on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and/or Brazil and China’s ability to play a mediator role. Remember, Lula has been forefront in this idea that Brazil, even though it doesn’t stand as a country with major equities in Eastern Europe, can lead a mediation group – what he called the Peace Club – along with countries like Indonesia and, probably at some point, China, to bring an end to the conflict in Ukraine.

So for Brazil, I think there’s a lot that the Brazilians want to accomplish in South Africa next week. But a lot of it is sort of imagery and fitting within the overall foreign posture that Brazil takes to the world, heralding this – the start of a new multipolar era. And Lula will fit right in in setting in Johannesburg next week.
Great. Thank you so much, Ryan. And thank you to all of my colleagues for your thoughts, your remarks, your insights.

Now I will turn it back over to our AT&T operator to let everyone know how you can queue up for questions.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

And we will go to the line of Tom O'Connor with Newsweek. Please go ahead.

Q: Thank you guys so much for hosting this. Really appreciate it.

Two questions, if I may. The first being, I know there was obviously some conversation about this growing idea of active nonalignment. Which, you know, in some ways obviously describes Brazil, but also other parts of the global south as well, including Africa, which is also discussed. I just kind of wanted to ask some of the experts here, first of all, what exactly entails the incentives for these countries to do this at a time where there’s, of course, been some frustration with Western-led financial and development institutions?

And then my second question would be – and, of course, I’m opening this up to anyone on the line – is talking about the expansion of BRICS, specifically. I know that there’s been some questions about what exactly BRICS has accomplished, but there are, you know, there is this growing membership here. So I kind of want to know if some of the experts could speak to exactly what has driven this growing sort of interest in BRICS. And we might actually see quite a big group of countries – from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Argentina – to join this. Thank you very much.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Tom.

Ryan, would you like to start with this one, and then others can jump in?

Dr. Berg: Sure. On the idea of active nonalignment, I think what underlies or undergirds the entire theory is that – it’s an interest-based theory. It’s not a sort of doctrinaire traditional Cold War-style, nonalignment. So what Brazil would say is, you know, sometimes we align with Washington, sometimes with the global south, and it depends on the issue. So Brazil is looking out for its own interest. I think undergirding everything is when – there’s this idea that when – there’s no on automatic alignment on when they’re when there’s not a sort of clear
It can heighten the relevance of a country like Brazil, which is sometimes overlooked and feels overlooked and neglected. So by pursuing this strategy, you can basically make it a competition for the affection or for the attention of major world powers or leading world powers, that would otherwise overlook Brazil’s position on a particular issue. Now, Brazilian diplomats won’t be very open about that. They usually just couch it in terms of Brazil pursuing its own interest, and that those interests lie sometimes with the global south sometimes with Washington. And that that is – that’s active nonalignment, looking at it from an issue-by-issue basis, as opposed to more of a doctrine bases.

But underlying all of it, I think, is this idea that Brazil can gain greater relevance and gain greater ground on a global scale – on the global scene, rather – if it is not sort of automatically aligned with one or the other and makes it a competition for its affection in these issues of global import. There’s been a lot of conversation about that underlying foundational assumption in the Latin American policy community.

Some think that it is an accurate assumption to make, while others have argued – such as former U.S. ambassadors – that this is the greatest and fastest route to irrelevance. (Laughs.) Exactly the opposite of what the approach to foreign policy is intended. So that’s what I would say about ANA. But it’s a theory that’s catching a lot of interest within the global south, and especially within Latin America. And insofar as Brazil as a leader of Latin American diplomatic action and doctrine, ANA is a very important part of Brazil’s approach to BRICS.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Ryan.

Would anyone else like to jump in here before we go to our next question?

Ms. Hadda: Well, I would just add in the case of India, you know, India has a long and proud tradition – it used to call it nonalignment, I think. From India’s point of view, they’ve actually tilted further to the United States and regional partners like Australia and Japan, just through things like the Quad and Malabar exercises, joint exercises, than has ever been the case. So I think for a country like India, you know, it’s not to be recognized. I think they are being recognized. I think it’s more to just exert maximum flexibility according to its own interests.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Katherine.
And we will go on to our next question.

Operator: At the moment, we have no further questions in the queue.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Ms. Montfort: Great. And then I'll take this moment – this is Paige, again – to jump in with a few questions from Lynsey Chutel with The New York Times in Johannesburg. She couldn't ask her questions herself because of a power outage, but I'll jump in and ask them now.

So her first question is: How will the rivalry between China and India affect the summit’s ability to pass any real resolutions? And so maybe I'll pose that one first to Brian and to Katherine.

Mr. Hart: Yeah, I'll just jump in here. As we've kind of flagged throughout our remarks earlier, I think this is – the China-India competition and tensions have been a key source of, you know, disagreements and, I think, instability within BRICS, and a key reason why we won't see major outcomes that that transform BRICS from this specific summit. I think, you know, India has a real interest in trying – you know, as has been previously noted – I think India has a real interest in trying to walk a line, you know, to stay – not to align. But it is increasingly moving towards, you know, the West, towards the United States, with groupings like the Quad. And so because of that, you see China increasingly wary of India and its intentions. So I do think that really here is one of the biggest limitations.

I do think that there are steps underway by Beijing and Delhi to try to ease some of the most acute sources of their tensions, like along the border. But fundamentally, you know, those tensions are going to remain. These are the two largest powers in Asia in terms of population and across a lot of other metrics. And so there’s a bit of just fundamental competition that’s going to – I don’t think that that’s going to go anywhere anytime soon. And so that will just fundamentally remain a source of tension.

You know, and from China’s perspective, I think this is why Beijing sees interest in potentially expanding BRICS. It can help to potentially dilute the influence of India, potentially, while, you know, retaining a good bit of Chinese influence. Because if you if you think about this in sheer economic size and broader geopolitical heft, if you were to add, you know, 10 to 15 more members to BRICS, you know, some of these other economies that have expressed interest in joining, China’s still going to account for a huge portion of that overall economic size of BRICS. And
so they’re still going to retain a large amount of their influence, even if – even if the organization expands.

And so if you look at it that way, I think expansion favors – strategically favors China, whereas it is perhaps not as much in the interest of some of the smaller states and economies within the grouping. I’ll stop there.

Ms. Montfort: Thanks, Brian.

Katherine?

Ms. Hadda: Thank you. I mean, I agree with a lot that Brian says and, sort of, as I said before, India’s interests are almost opposed to what China wants. For every reason that China might like to expand membership, as I noted earlier, India may not want to, as the balance of power tilts more to China. Regarding the border, you know, the situation does remain tough. I don’t know if I mentioned earlier, you know, the talks earlier this week. Senior military talks for the first time in some months between China and India to try and resolve the border issues. And what came out of it was a very non-substantive but varied statement – (laughs) – you know, that they were going to try and work to resolve it.

And I think that was designed to clear up some of the tensions, you know, the more immediate tensions before BRICS. And then, of course, we’ve already mentioned this, but India is hosting the G-20 this year. So, you know, just before September, I think also they don’t want that to be – you know, the border tensions or tensions with China to be an issue there. But I also think that, you know, India sees it’s an important part of what we were talking about, about the not-quite nonalignment, but being an independent actor. I do think India is a country that believes it’s important to keep sitting down and talking to people, and you see it in their actions. So, you know, I think that’s why BRICS remains, you know, important. Not just because of fears of what might entail if they don’t participate in BRICS. It’s just that it is, you know, part and parcel of the desire to be an independent, but a significant, player on the world stage. And to keep, you know, the worst tensions that they fall in there.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Katherine. And I would love to squeeze in one more question, I know, we’re almost at time, but one more pre-submitted question. And so this I’ll pose to anyone who’d like to start, but possibly Brian first.

The question is: Given the war in Ukraine and China’s security ambitions in the South China Sea, do you think security will be prioritized at this summit? And if so, do you think Beijing’s interests are going to lead those conversations on security?
Mr. Hart: Thanks, Paige. You know, I think it’s tough. I think from Beijing’s perspective, I think they’ll want to talk about some of these issues, especially and any chance that gives to push back against, you know, narratives against the United States and its allies. So from that perspective, yes, China is going to want to talk about some of these issues that are of shared concern. But I think overall, you know, the disagreements on some of these security issues, especially from the Indian perspective, are going to weigh on the ability to come to any major consensus on some of these security issues.

I think that’s why we tend to see from BRICS a more substantive focus on the non-hard security issues like food security, other – you know, global health. Those are things where there actually is quite a bit of substantive agreement. They’re also things that Beijing does care about. You know, Beijing has been really concerned about food security in recent years. And so any opportunities that it can use within BRICS to shore up its own energy and food security, those things are going to be useful potential gains that they can make within BRICS. But I think on the hard security side, it’s going to be more limited because of, you know, some of the fractures that exist, especially between, you know, China and India.

And I would also just note, you know, China has walked a pretty fine line when it comes to the war in Ukraine. I think they’ve very clearly chosen not to criticize Russia and to largely give tacit, you know, geopolitical propaganda and even some economic support for that. But they are also – you know, they so far haven’t taken major steps, such as overtly supplying weapons to support Russia. So they haven’t taken those steps that will create the blowback from them. And so, from that perspective, I think that plays into Beijing’s larger strategy of playing a balancing act. And I think, you know, other countries, I think, in BRICS will take that to some extent. Although, again, we have seen, you know, countries like Brazil be more overt in pushing back against the Russian war.

So summing that all up, I don’t see major security discussions being pushed here, just because of the limitations. But I do think we’ll see, you know, some of the non-security things potentially seeing some development.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Brian.

Maria, Mvemba, would you have anything you’d like to add there, on the Russia-Ukraine side, or on security more broadly, before we wrap up?
Dr. Snegovaya: I generally agree with everything that my colleagues have said. I think Russia will make sure to silence any voices condemning invasion of Ukraine. In case it fails and we do hear some of their statements in that regard, that certainly will demonstrate major weakness in Russia side. But I think that’s very unlikely to happen.

One more thing I wanted to flag is the failed grain deal. Russia has been lately offering alternatives, like one-by-one individual solutions to multiple African countries, for example, and India also. So I think that will be possibly one of the leverages that Russia will try to use to demonstrate sort of its goodwill towards sustaining the grain deal and offering sort of contracts that kind of help it avoid engaging with Ukraine. But other than that, generally, I agree with the rest of the statements by my colleagues.

Mr. Dizolele: Paige, Mvemba here. I will start by saying I agree with what my colleagues have said. However, I think both China and Russia will use this opportunity, meaning use the BRICS to engage with the other Africans – the other Africans that will be attending this, the other African countries, that is, at the margins – or on the margins of the summit. I think it will be a lost opportunity for China or Russia not to engage on the security front. I mean, particularly for Russia, that’s one of the biggest leverage that they have – its weapon system, defense, and security agreements. So I cannot imagine the Russian not making, you know, a go at it. They will have to exploit the moment and engage further with those leaders who will be there, or with the other representatives, particularly coming right as they’ve concluded the St. Petersburg Summit.

They fell short on various fronts, as far as the expectations of Africans at that summit. And I think this will be another opportunity for them to seize on and further engage with African countries on that front. The rest for China, China is there – as we say, Xi Jinping is there on official visit as well. And South Africa being a country that takes leadership on various front, I think China will also use this opportunity to engage on the security front. And I’m talking about hard security with African countries as well.

Thank you.

Dr. Berg: Paige, if I can just give the Brazilian perspective on this before we finish?

Ms. Montfort: Yes. Please, go ahead.

Dr. Berg: I think in this regard Brazil is a major voice that would moderate any kind of statements or discussions of major security issues, only because
it’s caught in a pretty difficult balance given its position in the Western Hemisphere. And institutionally speaking, how much the Brazilian Armed Forces enjoy a very strong relationship with the U.S. and, as of 2019, major non-NATO ally status, which gives them additional capabilities that I don’t think that they would want to risk. So insofar as any of the security discussions would revolve around NATO or statements about NATO and its – and its culpability for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Brazil will probably be a major break on some of those types of statements or discussions coming out of the summit. So I think it’s not to say that Brazil wouldn’t engage in security conversations, but I think that Brazil could potentially play a moderating role in some of those security conversations given its position in the Western Hemisphere and how much its armed forces enjoy a close working relationship with the United States.

Ms. Hadda: And I would just add – almost it doesn’t need to be added – but India will be the same, not just because of the internal dynamics between the BRICS partners that we’ve been discussing but also because they really will not want to do anything that could, in fact, antagonize the United States or its partners in that kind of way. And I think while BRICS is sort of a mirror to the G-7 on some of the economic and social issues we’ve been discussing, anything too ambitious on the security side would be very different.

Ms. Montfort: Wonderful. Thank you so much, everyone. And thank you to all of you for sticking around. I know we’re a few minutes over, so I’m going to end the Q&A there. However, if you were in the queue, if you have additional questions or follow-ups, please, of course, feel free to reach out to me, Paige Montfort, by email or by phone, and I’m happy to connect you with any of the fantastic experts that were on this briefing call today.

As a reminder, I’ll send out the transcript within just a few hours here, and it’ll be posted to CSIS.org as well. And we really appreciate you dialing in. Have a great weekend, everyone.

(END)