

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Grouping in Transition: India's Diplomatic Balancing in an Emerging Multipolar World

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Introduction

The enlargement of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) from a small grouping of evolving economies into a bigger geopolitical coalition of the Global South marks a notable transformation in international politics. It has now evolved into a major political and strategic platform seeking to influence global governance, financial systems, trade structures, and the wider balance of power. But, as BRICS grows in influence, it also faces increasing internal contradictions.¹ The recent differences within the group over the West Asian crisis reveal the challenges of managing a coalition that now includes strategic competitors, rival regional ambitions, and differing geopolitical priorities. For India, which chairs BRICS in 2026, this transformation presents both an opportunity and a diplomatic test.

Growth of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Grouping

The origin of BRICS lies in the changing economic realities of the early 21st Century. In 2001, economist Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs coined the term 'BRIC' for four rapidly emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which he believed would play a defining role in shaping the future global economy. Initially, the group was purely economic in nature, but global political developments soon gave it geopolitical significance. The leaders of the four countries first met informally in 2006 on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, and the first official BRIC Summit was held in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The grouping expanded in 2010 when South Africa joined, transforming BRIC into BRICS, and extending its reach into the African continent.

BRICS has progressively increased its institutional and political profile. One of its prime achievements has been the establishment of the New Development Bank in 2014, headquartered in Shanghai. The bank symbolised the desire of emerging economies to reduce dependence on Western-controlled financial structures and build alternative mechanisms, better aligned with the priorities of the developing world. It was conceived as an alternative development financing institution to the Western-led

banks, with potential to support infrastructure, connectivity, and sustainable development projects without political conditionalities.²

The member states of BRICS have repeatedly called for reforms in the UN Security Council, more equitable representation in global financial institutions, and greater consideration for the developmental concerns of the Global South. Over time, BRICS has strongly advocated for issues such as local currency trade, alternative payment mechanisms, digital financial systems, climate financing, technology cooperation, and the reduction of dependence on the US dollar in international trade.³

Rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa+ Grouping

BRICS altered dramatically during the 2023 Johannesburg Summit, when the grouping decided to expand its membership. Following the decision, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Indonesia became part of the expanded BRICS framework while Saudi Arabia also participated in several engagements. BRICS was, thus, no longer a coalition of large emerging economies; it became a much broader geopolitical platform representing a major section of the Global South. Collectively, the grouping currently represents nearly half of the world's population and a substantial share of global gross domestic product on a purchasing power-parity basis. It includes major energy producers and consumers, manufacturing giants, strategic transit states, resource-rich economies, and important regional powers.

However, the growth also led to the BRICS's deep internal complexities.⁴ Unlike formal alliances built around shared security objectives, BRICS includes countries with sharply divergent geopolitical interests and competing regional agendas. India and China continue to face unresolved border tensions. Iran and the UAE have longstanding regional rivalries and differing strategic alignments. Russia's confrontation with the West creates another layer of geopolitical friction within the grouping. As a result, BRICS today represents both the assurance and the contradictions of a multipolar world.

Core Emerging Faultlines

The recent BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting held on 14–15 May 2026 in New Delhi, under India's chairmanship, revealed that the grouping is now confronting contradictions that were less visible when it had five members. Previously, despite differences, the grouping functioned largely around shared economic interests and a common desire for greater space for emerging economies. The expanded BRICS,

however, now includes countries with directly competing geopolitical visions and security concerns.

The major divide is over the prospective character of BRICS itself. China and Russia increasingly view BRICS as a strategic counterpoise to Western influence and the United States (US)-led institutions. Their emphasis is on hastening de-dollarisation, consolidating alternative financial systems, and building a geopolitical coalition capable of challenging Western dominance. India, Brazil, and several other members, however, remain cautious about turning BRICS into an overtly anti-Western bloc. India seeks strategic autonomy rather than alignment politics and continues to maintain strong partnerships with the US, Europe, Japan, and other Western powers.

The inclusion of Iran has presented another complexity. Tehran seeks stronger political backing within BRICS against Western sanctions, and against the US and Israeli actions in West Asia. The UAE, Egypt, and some other members are far more guarded because of their deep economic ties with Western countries. During the recent foreign ministers' discussions, the member states could not reach a unified conclusion after disagreements over the language concerning the West Asian conflict. This resonated a profound divergence regarding the political direction that BRICS should take in the future crises.

Another vital faultline concerns China's emergent influence within the grouping. While Beijing remains the leading economic power in BRICS and a major driver of its expansion, some members remain wary of its excessive dominance.

Economic asymmetry also remains a challenge. China's economy is considerably larger than the collective economic strength of several other BRICS members, creating concerns regarding unequal influence over trade, finance, and institutional decision-making. Also, members differ sharply in political systems, economic structures, regional priorities, and foreign policy orientations. Maintaining solidity in such a diverse grouping is becoming increasingly difficult as geopolitical crises intensify.⁵

India's Strategic Balancing Challenge

For India, these developments create an intensely delicate diplomatic situation. The UAE is one of India's most important strategic and economic partners in West Asia, with bilateral relationship encompassing trade, investment, energy cooperation, maritime security, and extensive people-to-people ties. Similarly, Iran too remains strategically significant for India because of its geographical position and connectivity

potential. Projects such as Chabahar Port provide India with access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran is also important for India's long-term energy security calculations.

India needs to be supple and agile in its approach. Supporting one side openly risks alienating the other, while excessive neutrality could limit India's ability to shape outcomes within BRICS itself. This challenge is significant because New Delhi maintains close strategic partnerships with the US and Western powers while also upholding established defence and energy ties with Russia. India's foreign policy has conventionally relied on strategic autonomy and attuned balancing, but sustaining this approach is increasingly difficult as geopolitical rivalries intensify across regions.

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the Connectivity Dimension

The stresses in West Asia also have direct repercussions for India's economic and connectivity ambitions. The IMEC, announced during the G20 Summit in New Delhi, was envisioned as a transformative connectivity enterprise linking India with Europe through the Gulf region. The corridor was expected to enhance trade flows, strengthen logistics networks, and provide a strategic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, ongoing instability in West Asia impends the viability of such projects.

Energy Security and the Strait of Hormuz

Energy security remains another critical apprehension. A large portion of India's crude oil, liquified natural gas, and liquified petroleum gas imports passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Any interruption in Gulf shipping routes directly affect fuel prices and economic growth.⁶ India seeks stability as its economic growth trajectory is deeply connected to uninterrupted energy flows and maritime trade.

Another consequence of protracted instability in West Asia is an increase in Russia's leverage over India's energy security. If Gulf energy supplies become less reliable, India may become more dependent on Russian energy exports. This would strengthen Moscow's bargaining position while simultaneously complicating India's broader geopolitical balancing strategy.

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Grouping and the Future of Multipolarity

The growth of BRICS reflects a larger makeover taking place in the international system. The world is gradually moving from a predominantly unipolar world towards a

more fragmented and competitive multipolar structure. However, the current situation also validates that multipolarity does not automatically produce stability. As new centres of power emerge, international institutions progressively become arenas for strategic competition, regional rivalries, and competing political visions. BRICS symbolises both the aspirations and the challenges of this emerging order.

Despite its internal contradictions, BRICS is unlikely to decline in the foreseeable future. In fact, its significance may only grow because the conditions that gave rise to BRICS remain robust across much of the Global South. Many developing countries see BRICS as an important platform through which emerging powers can collectively negotiate for greater influence in global affairs.⁷ Though, the future efficacy of BRICS will depend on whether it can remain a flexible coalition focused on pragmatic collaboration rather than becoming trapped in ideological or geopolitical confrontation.

India's role will be central to this balance, as it is perhaps the only major BRICS member that simultaneously enjoys working relationships with the West, Russia, the Gulf states, Iran, and the broader Global South. India's objective during its BRICS presidency should, therefore, be to prevent excessive polarisation and to keep the organisation focused on developmental cooperation rather than ideological confrontation.

Conclusion

For India, the test ahead is both delicate and significant. As the Chair of BRICS in 2026, New Delhi will look at preserving cohesion within an increasingly diverse grouping. The success of this balancing act will not only influence the future course of BRICS but could also shape the wider evolution of the Global South at a time of mounting global uncertainty. The BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting in New Delhi emphasised these underlying contradictions. The Chair's Statement merely acknowledged "Differing Views", underscoring the increasing difficulty of attaining consensus within an expanded BRICS.⁸ The chapter exposed a deeper structural dilemma within BRICS; while the grouping remains united in advocating multipolarity and reform of global governance institutions, it struggles to articulate a coherent geopolitical position on contentious international crises.

The outcome reinforced the significance of strategic balancing amid intensifying regional and global rivalries. The carefully calibrated language in the statement reflected India's apprehensions over instability in the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea

shipping routes that are vital to its energy security and trade flows.⁹ By eschewing overt alignment with either Iran or the Gulf states, India sought to preserve its strategic autonomy while projecting itself as a stabilising middle power capable of engaging all sides.

Endnotes

¹ Heena Makhija and Sandra Thachirickal Prathap, “BRICS in a Fractured Order: What the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Revealed”, *ORF Expert Speak*, 20 May 2026, accessed 22 May 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/brics-in-a-fractured-order-what-the-foreign-ministers-meeting-revealed>

² Ibid.

³ AP, “BRICS Foreign Ministers meet in India as Iran war, oil prices, internal divisions test bloc’s unity”, *The Hindu*, 14 May 2026, accessed 22 May 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/brics-foreign-ministers-meet-in-india-as-iran-war-oil-prices-internal-divisions-test-blocs-unity/article70977220.ece>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Media Center, “BRICS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Under India’s Chairship”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 14 May 2026, accessed 22 May 2026, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/41130/BRICS+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+Under+Indias+Chairship+May+1415+2026>

⁶ AP, “BRICS Foreign Ministers meet”.

⁷ Home, “BRICS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”, *DD News*, accessed 26 May 2026, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/tag/brics-foreign-ministers-meeting/>

⁸ Media Center, “Chair’s Statement and Outcome Document at BRICS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 15 May 2026, accessed 22 May 2026, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/41144>

⁹ Media Center, “BRICS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”

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