

Implications of an Expanding BRICS in Light of Turkey's Bid to Join

Introduction

Turkey has recently expressed its intentions of joining Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), as confirmed by its ruling Justice and Development Party.^[1] As a country that is strategically nestled between continental Europe and Asia—it holds candidature to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a crucial partnership with the European Union (EU). It is now seeking to build companions beyond the West.^[2]

Turkey is a middle-income country with a growing need for an advanced investment ecosystem, legal and market system. It houses an exceptionally industrialised economy along with high human development indices.^[3] These key characteristics are a shared commonality between Turkey and the BRICS nation states.

It is indeed rational for Turkey to reach out for more lucrative partnerships, given that the EU-Turkey Customs Union Treaty is still inconclusive.^[4] Besides, Russia and China are Turkey's major trading partners, close behind the EU.^[5] Hence, Turkey's decision to join BRICS hints at forging fresh economic ties and, by extension, develop a counterweight to western powers and alliances, primarily NATO. Similarly, BRICS too presents itself as a direct antidote to the Group of Seven (G7), NATO and western hegemony as a whole. According to Jim O'Neill, leading British economist, Turkey faces the "Complications of the United States (US)-centred system and the new world order"^[6], which BRICS explicitly challenges as one of its primary tenets.

Implications of BRICS's Expansion

This development raises discussion on the extent of change BRICS will undergo with the mandate to expand its membership. It is vital to analyse BRICS's leading agendas, inter-state relationships, and the impact on India's posture.

One of its primary criticisms is the organisation's inability to arrive at common consensus amongst nation states, which may intensify from now on. C Raja Mohan's description of the BRICS's struggle to turn "Soaring rhetoric on global issues into concrete, practical outcomes"^[7] is an apt consideration. In addition, the admission of new members in 2023 saw friendly regional allies enter India's diplomatic vicinity, which provides New Delhi with ample leeway to champion South Asian recognition. Yet, it is important to keep an eye on China's increasingly buoyant influence in the group as it could result in the dilution of India's role.

Indo-Turkey Discord

Moreover, Turkey's bid spells out a dubious outcome for India as Indo-Turkey relations have been rocky in the recent past. There exist three key points of contention between the two nations i.e., Turkey's disapproval of the India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor (IMEC), the Kashmir issue, and an apparent export ban on Turkish military equipment to India.

IMEC. In September 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opposed the India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor (IMEC), stating that it should not bypass Turkey.^[8] The project is a network of routes that joins India, the Arabic Gulf and Europe. It aims at enhancing connectivity and economic assimilation across the region. It also largely benefits Greece and Cyprus—Turkey's long-time adversaries. Regardless, Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi met with the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis in August 2023 to finalise ports for the project.^[9]

Pro-Kashmir Stance. Turkey has expressed its opposition to the abrogation of Article 370 by the Modi government which essentially ended Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status within the Indian state. In September 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated on the question of Kashmir, "Another development which will pave the way for regional serenity, stability and prosperity in South Asia will be the establishment of a just and lasting peace in Kashmir through dialogue and cooperation between India and Pakistan".^[10] This statement had been seen as a violation of India's sovereignty and signalled a significantly downward slant in India-Turkey relations. Erdoğan also appeals to China and Pakistan by affirmative expressions on their respective territorial integrity, which clashes aggressively with that of India.

Similarly, New Delhi has explicitly sided with Greece in its Aegean Sea conflict against Turkey, and forged ties with Armenia in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as well as Cyprus.^[11] These stances portray the oblique opposition in India and Turkey's global partnerships.

Export Ban. A recent conflict over an 'Export Ban' on Turkish military equipment surfaced in July 2024, with Turkish officials claiming that India has been blacklisted as a recipient of Turkish defence support.^[12] New Delhi has rejected these claims—with the Ministry of External Affairs reporting it as "Disinformation at best".^[13] By forgoing an agreement with Turkish firms, which was confirmed in 2020, the Hindustan Shipyard Limited decided to construct support ships for the Indian Navy. This was keeping in mind the need for strengthening self-sufficiency in domestic defence manufacture.

Such discourse has inevitably led to heightening tensions between the two countries, which may further develop if Turkey joins BRICS.

Structural Implications on BRICS

It is worth noting here that while interstate rivalry within the BRICS is more or less omnipresent, none of these rivalries have reached conclusive answers because of its member nations' commitment to non-interference and sovereignty. Indo-China tensions are the current focal political divide within BRICS, which may weaken political cohesion of the group as a whole. Bilateral conflicts of interest, hence, remain uncharted territory.

Correspondingly, unlike other multinational organisations, BRICS does not have a standard conflict-resolution mechanism to smoothen hiccups amongst nation states. Turkey's news poses questions on BRICS's growing organisational loopholes, consensus mechanism and its role in reforming Eurocentric international institutions.

Implications on India

With recent admissions, BRICS may transform from a peaceful buffer alliance to a hostile anti-West alliance. It clashes directly with India's intent of maintaining friendly ties with the US and the G7 nations as a whole. It is imperative for New Delhi to walk the tightrope of balanced diplomacy, at a time when Indo-US ties specifically are growing stronger than ever.

In 2018, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of BRICS had surpassed the GDP of the G7 in terms of purchasing power parity.^[14] This growth cites a bright future for BRICS. It is also a likely propellant for China as a stronger influencer within the group, and by extension, in the global world order. This poses yet another possibility of New Delhi getting overshadowed by Beijing's rise.

China finds support for its Belt and Road Initiative with the likes of Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Greece.^[15] The mounting support for China's ambitious regional project may shift New Delhi to the backburner within BRICS. This can have far-reaching consequences for India's aspiration to succeed as the voice of the Global South.

Despite the grey implications of Turkey's entry and China's rise, New Delhi's ambition towards a multipolar world order may find a ray of hope. BRICS now serves as a platform to forge better ties with strong Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, hence, directly widening New Delhi's venture to project itself as an influential powerhouse. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are a boon, given New Delhi's expanding trade and energy interests in the Middle East.^[16] An expanded BRICS also allows New Delhi to lobby on advancing digital connectivity, climate change, food security, and so on. These are all transnational issues that mandate tactical engagement with the West.

Conclusion

The expansion of BRICS may, on the one hand, uncover a plethora of negotiation tracks and new allies for India. The anti-West stance of Chinese and Russian counterparts is effectively neutralised by the likes of Argentina, Ethiopia and Egypt. Hence, New Delhi's pursuit in balancing ties with the West and beyond can remain a sustainable cause. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and Argentina are capable of enhancing India's regional aspirations.

On the other hand, the prospect of Beijing's rising influence seems highly plausible. New Delhi needs to be wary of Chinese allies within the BRICS, such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc. It is, hence, important for New Delhi to re-evaluate its relations with Turkey, along with maintaining a cordial influence over Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Chinese allies.

India needs to emphasise on raising issues of the Global South, push for structural reforms in international organisations and capitalise on economic cooperation with its adversaries.

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