

# India's Strategic Agency in BRICS and the Future of Global South Cooperation

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## Abstract:

BRICS refers to the group of countries comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. India occupies a complex position within this coalition. India is an emerging major power and a self-proclaimed champion of the Global South. It is also engaged in Western-led institutions and regional security arrangements. This study analyzes India's strategic role in BRICS and examines its implications for future cooperation in the Global South. India's growing use of BRICS as an overarching strategy focuses on autonomy and "multi-alignment." This strategy enhances India's global role in global governance while reducing the influence of the West and China–Russia relations, positioning India as a leading power in the Global South. However, India's agency is limited by power imbalances among the BRICS countries, differing national ambitions, and the significance of Western partnerships that support its development and security. Therefore, BRICS serves as a dynamic diplomatic platform that fits within the fractured global governance system. However, it does not serve as the primary institution for a unified South. Finally, this article explores possible future trajectories for the BRICS countries and suggests avenues for research on India's changing role.

**Keywords — BRICS, India, Global South, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, South–South Cooperation.**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades BRICS has represented a shift from a Western-centered international order to a more diverse and contested global system (Library of Congress, n.d.; Stimson Center, 2022). India's position is particularly complex and ambiguous. It is a rising power and a self-proclaimed voice of the Global South. At the same time it is a key partner for the United States, Europe and Indo-Pacific actors (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022). These overlapping identities influence India's engagement with the BRICS. It does not see BRICS as a strictly anti-Western coalition but rather as a platform within a broader strategy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment (Narlikar, 2024).

India's role in BRICS has changed from being an early participant in a loose coalition to a selective agenda setter that influences the group's direction

(Library of Congress, n.d.). However, India's influence is limited by imbalances within BRICS particularly because of China's economic and political power. Additionally, India must balance its growing ties with the West while maintaining long-standing partnerships with Russia and other Global South countries (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024).

## II. STRATEGIC AGENCY, MIDDLE POWERS AND SOUTH–SOUTH COOPERATION

Many people describe India as a "rising power," "pivotal state," or "middle power plus." India's influence comes from its diplomatic reach, economic potential, normative voice and material capabilities (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022). Strategic agency is a state's ability to identify issues, choose broad policy objectives, build coalitions, and engage in cooperation across different areas to pursue its interests.

India exercises its strategic agency through ‘multi-alignment’ by engaging with Western democracies, non-Western coalitions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and initiatives that aim to lead the Global South (Narlikar, 2024). Traditionally, South–South cooperation involves developing countries collaborating as equals to pursue their development goals and maintain policy autonomy. Many see BRICS as a key platform for this project, especially through the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). These serve as alternatives or complements to the Bretton Woods institutions (Flemes, 2021; New Development Bank, 2014).

The differences in political systems, economic profiles, and strategic priorities among the BRICS member countries are fundamentally diverse. This diversity makes any claim to the leadership of the Global South selective and contested (Flemes, 2021; Kumar, 2023). India’s role in BRICS goes beyond simply resisting the West. It navigates its relationship with China, maintains ties with Russia, allows for cooperation with the West and upholds credibility with a broader range of developing countries (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024).

### **III. THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA’S ENGAGEMENT WITH BRICS**

#### ***3.1 From BRIC to BRICS: Multipolarity and Voice***

The BRIC concept started with a report from the investment bank Goldman Sachs in 2001. This report predicted the growth of the economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (Library of Congress, n.d.). Consequently, diplomatic initiatives began which led to the first BRIC summit in 2009. India’s early support aimed to promote multipolarity and sought greater representation in international financial institutions due to reforms in IMF and World Bank quotas (Kumar, 2023; Library of Congress, n.d.). Earlier communications emphasized the need for development financing and a more inclusive global economic structure. They expressed dissatisfaction with the slow progress of Bretton Woods reforms (Flemes, 2021; New Development Bank, 2014).

#### ***3.2 Institutional Deepening: NDB and CRA***

The addition of South Africa in 2011, along with the establishment of the NDB and CRA in 2014, marked a phase of institutionalization (Flemes 2021; New

Development Bank 2014). All NDB members have equal votes and equal shares of capital. This design aims to prevent any single member, particularly China, from exercising its dominance (Kumar, 2023; New Development Bank, 2014). It serves as an alternative source of financing for infrastructure and for sustainable development. This indicates an emerging economy’s ability to create credible multilateral institutions (Flemes, 2021).

#### ***3.3 BRICS+, Enlargement and a More Contested Landscape***

Both the recent expansions of “BRICS+” and their limitations have highlighted India’s influence. China and Russia back a larger geopolitical coalition. In contrast, India promotes balanced growth to avoid empowering China and to prevent BRICS from becoming a self-declared anti-Western alliance (Ito, 2023; Kumar, 2023). India strategically engages through sub-coalitions and issue-based alignments (Ito, 2023).

### **IV. DIMENSIONS OF INDIA’S STRATEGIC AGENCY IN BRICS**

#### ***4.1 Agenda Setting and Issue Leadership***

India hopes to lead the world in developing better public infrastructure, climate finance, and equitable growth. It promotes poverty reduction, sustainable infrastructure, and MSME growth. The alignment of BRICS cooperation with domestic priorities and G20 goals is (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024). India has overtaken the digital economy with low-cost and compatible platforms inspired by the Aadhaar and UPI. The difference between this and the Western corporations and the Chinese state is noted (Ito, 2023; Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). When it comes to climate change, India highlights “common but differentiated responsibilities.” It also highlights the need for climate finance and developmental space (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024).

#### ***4.2 Managing Asymmetry with China and Russia***

India has a significant trade deficit with China. It also faces technological gaps and military differences along its borders with China. These issues could threaten China’s dominance in the BRICS. They may also create the perception that the BRICS is aligned with Beijing (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022). In this context, India supports institutional arrangements that distribute power evenly, protect monetary autonomy, and avoid reliance on Chinese

financial systems (Flemes 2021; New Development Bank 2014). India has strong strategic defense and energy ties with Russia. Russia's relationship with the West has been tense since the Cold War. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has caused a geopolitical shift. India's stance on Ukraine is cautious, as it remains committed to strategic autonomy (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022).

#### **4.3 BRICS as Part of a Multi-Alignment Strategy**

India's participation in BRICS strengthens its role in the G20, SCO and Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). This multi-alignment enhances India's bargaining power and autonomy. India's independence and neutrality will help it reduce risks and enhance diplomatic leverage. This approach allows India to keep its options open (Ito, 2023; Stimson Center, 2022).

### **V. INDIA, BRICS AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL SOUTH COOPERATION**

#### **5.1 Voice of the Global South or Selective Advocacy?**

India is set to become a stronger voice for the Global South. In 2023, India hosted two "Voice of Global South Summits" during its G20 presidency (Ministry of External Affairs 2023). Leadership aims to amplify the concerns of marginalized developing countries in the South particularly by India (Ito, 2023). Climate finance and inclusive growth are top priorities on India's G20 agenda. The African Union's inclusion as a permanent member of the G20 will be supported (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024).

As a member of BRICS, India advocates for reforms in the UN Security Council, IMF, and World Bank. According to Kumar (2023) the story of the global south connects resilient infrastructure, food and energy security, and diversified supply chains. However, India's leadership appears to be selective. The least developed countries will not see their views reflected in China's statements on trade, IPR, technology, and security. As a result, advocacy is diverse rather than unified for the Global South (Ito, 2023; Narlikar, 2024). India and China compete for influence in the Global South through various institutional initiatives..

#### **5.2 Institutional Outcomes and Material Benefits**

The NDB has supported infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS nations

and has also lent to other developing countries. It serves as a smaller, complementary alternative to the World Bank and regional development banks (Flemes, 2021; New Development Bank, 2014). However, the use of the CRA is limited, even with the safety net it offers Flemes (2021).

The BRICS joint statement aligns their positions on climate finance, digital economy regulation, and investment. They use these in their dealings with Western counterparts (Ito, 2023; Kumar, 2023). However, BRICS has not managed to replace institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO. Many countries in the Global South still rely on them. As a result, BRICS adds to pluralism but does not alter the structure of global governance (Flemes, 2021; Narlikar, 2024).

#### **5.3 Possible Trajectories for BRICS and India's Role**

Three plausible trajectories include:

**Reformist Coordination:** BRICS is becoming a practical platform that focuses on issues such as climate finance, health, and infrastructure. India takes a leadership role based on specific issues and technical cooperation. This approach gradually shifts norms without ideological conflict (Flemes, 2021; Narlikar, 2024).

**Fragmented Forum:** The Sino-Indian rivalry and differing interests weaken BRICS cohesion. BRICS+ adopts more anti-Western rhetoric, but cooperation remains limited. India may shift its focus to other coalitions (Ito, 2023; Kumar, 2023).

**Multi-Platform Pragmatism:** India continues to use BRICS along with the G20, SCO, Quad, and Global South summits. This approach helps build shifting coalitions on specific issues. India acts as a nodal connector rather than a singular leader (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022).

### **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

India's role in BRICS highlights both the opportunities and limitations of strategic agency for a rising power caught between the Global North and South. It has evolved from being a participant in a loose coalition to a unique agenda-setter. India advocates for global governance reforms, promotes institutional innovation through the NDB and CRA, and shows solidarity with the Global South on

development and climate justice (Flemes, 2021; New Development Bank, 2014; Narlikar, 2024).

However, imbalances within BRICS, especially India's rivalry with China and dependence on Russia limit India's influence. It also needs to maintain good relations with Western partners. These relationships are crucial for technology, investment, and security (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022). These factors limit India's ability to guide BRICS toward a unified vision for the Global South. They also hinder its capacity to present BRICS as a cohesive alternative to existing institutions (Flemes, 2021; Kumar, 2023).

BRICS should be seen as a part of India's broader multi-alignment strategy. This strategy balances autonomy and partnership, voice and restraint as well as principle and pragmatism (Narlikar, 2024; Stimson Center, 2022). For the Global South, India's role in BRICS helps establish a more diverse system of representation and financing. However, it does not guarantee significant changes in global governance (Flemes, 2021; Ito, 2023).

India's domestic pathway and its interactions with China, Russia and the West as well as the evolving membership and agenda of BRICS will have an impact on India's strategic role and should be studied in future research. The coalition's impact on Global South cooperation should be analyzed. As Narlikar (2024) mentioned India can either become a leader in meaningful reform or be just another actor in a divided and contested order earning a lot of reputation in either case.

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