

Why India's BRICS Presidency 2026 Matters in a Fragmented World?

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Abstract

India's BRICS 2026 presidency comes at a time when the group is expanding, the spirit of multilateralism is in decline and there is a tendency to weaponize trade dependence among great powers. India's presidency will ensure that BRICS does not become an incoherent bloc without an identity. This is the time for BRICS to recalibrate and India's presidency will show the future direction to this platform. Human centric development will be the focus which is largely in sync with India's 2023 G20 summit agenda. By being a bridge between Global North and Global South, India would want to ensure cooperative and development oriented multipolarity through its 2026 BRICS presidency.

Introduction

After hosting the 2023 G20 Summit, India has assumed the presidency of another important multilateral grouping, BRICS from January 1, 2026 and will be hosting the 18th BRICS Summit. India's BRICS presidency comes at an inflection point in global politics - the transition toward multipolarity has become chaotic amidst great power rivalries, the spirit of multilateralism is being challenged by unilateral impulses and BRICS is trying to manage its expansion process without losing its significance.

Multilateralism has been widely seen to be in decline as it has struggled to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances. The interest based and selective cooperation is now replacing the earlier universal rules based multilateral cooperation. It is, thus, a challenge and opportunity for India to place BRICS at the centre of matters related to the Global South.

The US, under the Trump administration will hold the G20 presidency in 2026 - a development that could indirectly impact India's BRICS presidency. After four consecutive G20 summits under Global South countries, there is a concern that the agenda could shift from the priorities of the Global South to America First.¹ The issues important for the Global South - climate change, sustainability, debt, inequality and development are already out of the American G20 agenda.² In this scenario, there is likely to be a competition between India led BRICS and the US led G20 in terms of agenda and narrative setting. Through its BRICS leadership, India will have to ensure that the Global South agenda is not marginalised.

Before analysing India's priorities for the 2026 BRICS presidency, it is important to understand the evolution and nature of BRICS as a grouping and how it fits in India's priorities.

Nature and Evolution of BRICS & India's Priorities

The origin of the BRICS concept was economic in nature, as Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs described BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) as a group of large emerging economies which had good growth potential in future based on their market size, growth trajectory and demographics.³ The time from 2001 to 2009 was a phase of agenda setting by the BRIC countries. The first BRIC meeting was held in 2006 at the foreign ministers level. The real push for creation of an institution like BRIC came from the global financial crisis in 2008 as it exposed the shortcomings of the Western financial institutions and created space for non-Western financial institutions.

BRIC was institutionalised in 2009 as the first BRIC summit was held in Russia's Yekaterinburg. The main concerns highlighted by the summit were - reform of international financial institutions, need for a multipolar world order, sustainable development, action against terrorism, climate change and energy security with special focus to protect the interests of the developing countries.⁴ The initial BRICS expansion happened in 2010 when South Africa joined, turning BRIC into BRICS. The inclusion of South Africa made BRICS a better representative of the Global South as a major African economy was represented in it.

During this period, BRICS also established two financial institutions, New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) to complement the Western financial institutions. Both NDB and CRA reflect the principle of equality through equal shareholding, voting power and safeguards against dominance of any country. This reflects alternate multilateralism, the non-Western spirit of governance in international financial institutions. However, geopolitical developments, particularly the growing India-China rivalry and Russia's estrangement from the West after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, increasingly influenced the cohesion, priorities, and strategic orientation of BRICS.

In the period from 2020 to 2023, BRICS has been impacted by two major global events - the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war. BRICS countries strengthened their cooperation in vaccine research and health cooperation, culminating in establishment of the BRICS Vaccine Research Centre in 2022 in India. The Russia-Ukraine war has consolidated the 'no limits' relationship between Russia and China who often would want to frame the BRICS as an 'anti-West' platform, unlike India, Brazil and South Africa who prefer to safeguard their balanced position and strategic autonomy within the group. The Western sanctions on Russia have expedited the 'non-dollar' payment mechanisms among the BRICS countries.

Since 2023, BRICS has been focused on its expansion process. The new members include Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, the UAE and Indonesia. Apart from the new members, BRICS also has partner countries like Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. The expansion process, however, has raised some concerns about efficiency, criteria, internal cohesion and identity of BRICS. There is also another important concern that BRICS should not become a geopolitical tool for Russia and China to settle scores with the West. Hence, India's BRICS presidency will help in deciding the future trajectory of the grouping.

BRICS aligns closely with India's foreign policy priorities: maintaining strategic autonomy, facilitates rise of a multipolar world, allows access to 'non-Western' financial institutions, highlights India as a leading voice of the Global South on issues like climate change, sustainable development and reform of global governance institutions like the UN Security Council, World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Priorities for India's BRICS 2026 Presidency

India's 2026 BRICS presidency seeks to redefine BRICS through 'Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability'. India will carry forward its 2023 G20 agenda with a people centric approach and humanity first agenda.⁵ India will also look to build consensus to oppose unilateral actions to weaponise trade, technology and critical minerals.⁶

India will continue to make efforts for reform of institutions of global governance instead of rejecting them, as is the case with the current US leadership. Climate change will figure high in India's priorities which will be based on ideas of climate justice, just and fair energy transition and strengthening climate finance for the Global South. India's bid to host the COP33 in 2028 has been supported by the BRICS partners.⁷ It is also an attempt by India to reframe climate governance away from emission targets alone and toward development-centred climate action.

Another issue that could become prominent during India's BRICS presidency is terrorism. In the initial years of BRICS formation, terrorism was a marginal and generic issue. BRICS statements were broad and declaratory on the issue. It was later recognised as a common security threat. Under its presidencies in the past, India has framed terrorism as a common threat that needs collective action. Under India's 2016 BRICS presidency, BRICS Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism was established.⁸ Under India's 2021 BRICS presidency, the BRICS Counter-Terrorism Action Plan was

adopted. India has also emphasised on terror financing and the nexus between new technologies, radicalisation and terrorism. BRICS is not a security organisation and any real benefits on terrorism are unlikely to come India's way, especially as China shields Pakistan against any Indian attempt to target Pakistan via BRICS on terrorism. At best, BRICS could become a norm setting and signalling platform against terrorism.

Through its BRICS leadership, India will also set an example of normative leadership based on equality and consensus, one that does not seek self-interest and hegemony but common good. India will also play a critical role in shaping the post-expansion BRICS agenda. India will have to use its G20 experience to harmonise interests between the old and new members on various issues. At the same time, India will also have to deal with the question of Pakistan's BRICS membership.

There are several reasons why Pakistan should not become a member of BRICS.

One, BRICS is mainly an economic organisation which started with emerging economies. BRICS members are expected to be major and emerging economies that can contribute to global growth and the Global South economic cooperation. With its chronic balance of payment crises and bailouts from the IMF, Pakistan is unlikely to be a value addition and will be more of a liability for BRICS.

Two, Pakistan's support to terrorism contradicts the counter-terrorism consensus within BRICS. This will be a normative blow to BRICS efforts to fight terrorism.

Three, Pakistan's overdependence on China is likely to disturb the internal balance within the BRICS. It is likely to behave more as an 'all weather' friend of China in the group than demonstrating strategic autonomy.

Four, there has been constant political instability in Pakistan which, along with economic problems, hampers its ability to develop state capacity for long-term planning. BRICS aspires to achieve long-term change, like reform of global governance institutions for which member states need to have policy predictability and continuity.

Five, Pakistan remains a rule taker (not a shaper) in issues of global governance and the Global South. It remains peripheral to the Global South leadership platforms like BRICS as it lacks a strong economic capability to help the institutional agenda.

Conclusion

India's BRICS 2026 presidency comes at a time when the group is expanding, the spirit of multilateralism is in decline and there is a tendency to weaponise trade dependence among great powers. India's presidency will ensure that BRICS does not become an incoherent bloc without an

identity. This is the time for BRICS to recalibrate and India's presidency will show the future direction to this platform. Human centric development will be the focus which is largely in sync with India's 2023 G20 summit agenda. By being a bridge between Global North and Global South, India would want to ensure cooperative and development oriented multipolarity through its 2026 BRICS presidency.

Endnotes

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