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# Reshaping Multipolarity: Analysing the Rise of Asian Power as INSTC and BRI in the BRICS+ Era

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**Abstract**

*In the era of great-power competition, this paper examines the convergent geoeconomic objectives of India's International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the context of an expanded BRICS+ framework. Looking from a neorealist perspective, which sees states navigating an anarchic international system in which each strives to secure relative power and security, the study explores how both initiatives exhibit strategic competition for regional influence while their primary function is to collectively accelerate the shift towards a multipolar global economic order — a crucial goal of BRICS. This paper analyses how INSTC acts as a significant geopolitical anchor for India, securing strategic autonomy and providing a 'sanctions-resistant corridor' for core BRICS members (Russia and Iran). It further explores how China is expanding through its BRI in BRICS countries, and assesses how these corridors enable the operationalisation of the BRICS agenda with respect to Eurasian supply chain resilience and the push for de-dollarisation. The findings examine how Asian powers are growing within the contemporary multipolar world order, within the BRICS+ framework, where they promote the interests of the Global community. Furthermore, it shows that India and China — two regional giants in Asia — are continuously growing, compete for influence, and maintain limited cooperation within the BRICS framework; yet each supports the idea of multipolarity against Western-led unipolarity or bipolarity.*

## Introduction

The global economic and geopolitical landscape is undergoing profound change, with power shifting from the Western-dominated centre to Asia's rising economies, particularly China and India. This reconfiguration is symbolic of a broader transition from a unipolar hegemony to multipolarity, in which non-Western actors are shaping international trade, economy, and connectivity. Against this backdrop, India and China, as rising powers in Asia, play significant roles. The BRICS+ framework is an intergovernmental organisation formed initially by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS). It was coined in 2001 by Goldman Sachs as an economic term to describe Brazil, Russia, China, and India (Chen et al., 2025). In 2010, South Africa joined this grouping. In 2009, it was formally established as a platform for economic and political cooperation for the promotion of an equitable global order by supporting multipolarity.

BRICS focuses on the reformation of global financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 2014, it established the New Development Bank (NDB) as an alternative to Western-led financial institutions, alongside introducing BRICS Pay to reduce dollar dominance, and a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) to provide emergency liquidity support during sanctions or economic instability — though the CRA is yet to be activated (Bunskoek & Verburg, 2025). In 2024 the membership expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and in January 2025, Indonesia joined as an official member, making the total membership 10 countries (Mai, 2025). Additionally, at the October 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, 10 new partner countries were added. More than 40 countries have expressed interest in joining, giving rise to the BRICS+ designation.

This expansion of BRICS is linked with a strategic response to evolving US policies, including trade wars and sanctions, leading towards the emergence of a multipolar world order. This paper argues that the development and occasional overlapping of China's BRI and India's INSTC serves as the physical infrastructure for BRICS' geopolitical vision, performing as parallel initiatives of Asian power projection despite underlying competition for regional influence. The INSTC in particular provides a secure and cost-effective alternative route for international trade and commerce between India, Russia, and Central Asian countries — increasingly vital as the Red Sea route has been repeatedly targeted by Houthi rebels and the Suez Canal has faced persistent blockages.

## Theoretical Framework: Neorealism

In this paper the researcher has adopted neorealism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), which explains the anarchic structure of the international order where states act as rational actors primarily focused on security, survival, and relative power gains (Waltz, 2004). The concept of polarity — unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar — shapes state behaviour and is used here to explain the multipolarity of the current world order and the role of these state actors within the system.

### *Multipolarity*

Multipolarity leads to fluid alliances where actors seek to balance with multiple partners and compete for influence. The BRICS+ expansion — from an initial 5 countries to 10 countries and beyond — illustrates the transition from US-led unipolarity to multipolarity and the redistribution of power as rising powers like China and India challenge Western dominance through their economic and infrastructure initiatives.

### *The Rise of BRI and INSTC as a Balance of Power Strategy*

China's BRI exemplifies John Mearsheimer's neorealism, where the state seeks to maximise its power and influence through infrastructure, bypassing strategic chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait. As of 2025, BRI is connected with 150 countries, exhibiting China's growing influence as Beijing enhances its relative power in a multipolar context. India's INSTC, by contrast, spans over 72,000 km as a multimodal corridor connecting India, Russia, Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan through railways, roads, and sea routes. It reduces transit time by 40% and costs by 30% by avoiding Pakistan and the Suez Canal (Azmi et al., 2024), reflecting a posture of defensive balancing. Critics argue that INSTC is designed to counter BRI — yet these two countries are growing in their own distinct ways; Beijing finances BRI unilaterally, while New Delhi develops INSTC through multilateral state cooperation.

### *Soft Balancing*

Neorealism explains how states employ economic corridors as 'soft balancing' tools to counter coercion without direct confrontation, while navigating pragmatic alliances. The recent example of Russia–India ties amid US sanctions illustrates how New Delhi balances relations with both Russia and the United States. Within the BRICS framework, India and China show limited cooperation despite ongoing border tensions — yet they have never severed commercial, economic, or diplomatic relations. They continue to engage in trade, commerce, and diplomacy. Similarly, India and Russia maintain cooperation despite India's Quad ties. This pragmatic alignment emphasises geoeconomic connectivity (BRI and INSTC). India's doctrine of Strategic Autonomy enables it to navigate multipolar alliances without ideological commitment to any single bloc.

**Figure 1: INSTC Route and Traditional Route**
**India's INSTC and BRICS**


*Source: Taneja et al. (August 2024)*

## India's INSTC and BRICS

The International North-South Transport Corridor has emerged as a pivotal trade route in the shifting landscape of global geopolitics, stretching from India to Europe via Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia. This 7,200-kilometre multimodal transport network combines railway, road, and sea connectivity. It aims to reduce shipping times and costs between South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. INSTC has gained importance as countries seek alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative, strengthening ties with Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. It was initiated on 12 September 2000 by India, Russia, and Iran; Azerbaijan and Armenia joined in 2005.

INSTC runs from India's Mumbai port (Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust – JNPT) through sea route towards Iran's Bandar Abbas port, across the Caspian Sea (Astara Port, Azerbaijan), into Russia's Astrakhan port, then through the hinterland to Moscow and onward to St. Petersburg (see Figure 1). As of 2025, INSTC has 13 member states (GOI, 2023). It is 30% cheaper and 40% shorter compared to traditional routes. While the Suez Canal route takes 30–45 days for cargo, INSTC reduces this to 10–15 days (Taneja et al., August 2024).

In 2024, Russia — under Western sanctions in the post-Ukraine war context — used the corridor as a vital route for trade diversification (Robert Lansing Institute, 2025), dispatching two coal-laden trains to India via INSTC. This integration occurred between Russian Railways (RZD) and the Container Corporation of India (CONCOR), who developed multimodal logistic services integrating railways and sea routes (Embassy of India, 2025). During Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to India in December 2025, both sides agreed to enhance connectivity and infrastructure under INSTC (GOI-MEA, 2025).

There is a distance of more than 17,000 km from Mumbai to London via the Cape of Good Hope. To reduce this, the British constructed the Suez Canal in the Sinai Peninsula in 1859, connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. After 1869, the Suez Canal reduced the distance from India to London to approximately 10,000 km. However, in recent times the Canal has been blocked on several occasions — during the 1956–1957 Suez Crisis, the 1967–1973 Arab-Israeli wars, and the 2021 Ever Given blockade (Hahn, 2021). Egypt charges approximately $70,000 per shipment. During 2023–2024, around 105 attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen on the Red Sea's Bab al-Mandab Strait reduced vessel traffic volume through the Suez Canal by 57.5%, while vessel traffic via the Cape of Good Hope increased by 100% (Sainz, 2025). This disruption caused high transportation costs, making INSTC a compelling alternative across the Eurasian region.

India has invested in Iran's Chabahar port, which will serve as a major INSTC node and provide an alternative to the Strait of Hormuz. It also allows Iran to compete with Gwadar port, while Russia gains direct connectivity to the Indian Ocean Region and reduces its dependency on the Turkish Strait and the Black Sea. INSTC represents a vital geoeconomic contribution to the BRICS vision — promoting multimodal trade flows, strengthening regional connectivity, and supporting financial reforms through transactions in member countries' own currencies.

## China's BRI and BRICS

**Figure 2: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

*Source: https://www.chinasquare.be*


China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, aims to enhance global trade and connectivity through roads, railways, pipelines, seaports, airports, power plants, and digital corridors, spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It has two components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which spreads over land, and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which expands over sea and water connections (Mallick, 2025). It comprises six economic corridors and encompasses 150 member countries as of 2025, mostly from the Global South. The popularity and acceptance of this initiative among Global South countries illustrates how rapidly China is growing its power and influence both in Asia and internationally (Wang, 2024).

China is a member of the BRICS alliance and a major Asian power in its own right. BRI has become intricately intertwined with the BRICS bloc — China strategically aligns the two frameworks to enlarge the voice of the Global South in this multipolar world order. Although China pursues its own interests, its role as an Asian power challenging the Western-led global order and Western monopoly over trade, politics, and the economy cannot be denied. BRI aligns with BRICS goals of multipolar governance and de-dollarisation by funding the New Development Bank (NDB) and utilising it for BRI projects. Among the ten official members of BRICS, seven have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with BRI. India, Brazil, and Russia have not officially signed, reflecting India's strategic autonomy concerns, while Russia and Brazil balance their relations with Beijing. In Brazil, for instance, the displacement of Ford cars by China's BYD vehicles is emblematic of the China–Brazil connection and the BRICS+ coalition.

## Conclusion

The rise of Asia in the contemporary multipolar world has been concretised and institutionalised through regional groupings among Asian powers. Organisations such as BRICS and BRICS+, the BRI initiative, and the operationalisation of INSTC are demonstrable examples that Asian states can sustain cooperation and mutually beneficial strategies — not as compulsion but as a response to the emerging situation, understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses and aligning individual interests for collective good in a peaceful manner. The confluence of INSTC and BRI within the BRICS+ framework, and their rise as major emerging economies, indicates the assertion of Asian powers in the era of multipolarity.

BRICS+ is reshaping the global multipolar order, with China, India, and Russia playing significant roles. The expansion of BRICS by 2025 has increased the GDP (purchasing power parity) share to 40%, surpassing the G7, and amplifying the voice of the Global South. Many countries view this as an opportunity to enhance their geopolitical standing, particularly those that are not members of other multilateral groupings such as the G20. BRICS is an inclusive formation capable of altering the trajectory of the Global South.

Beyond INSTC, India advances SAGAR, Project Mausam, and numerous other initiatives that strengthen its ties with multiple partners. While Russia and China face Western sanctions and the constraints of Western-dominated international organisations, these Asian powers are creating alternative spaces and opportunities to address Western domination. Both have their own policies for development and for reshaping the multipolar order by expanding the BRICS+ membership. Although India and China have multiple unresolved bilateral issues, they are coming together for a common cause as India assumes the BRICS presidency for the upcoming summit.

The trajectory is clear: BRICS countries are growing faster, their populations are expanding, and they possess the youngest demographics in the world. This population and wealth boom has given the group greater political weight, attracting more countries to seek membership. BRICS has even discussed a common currency, and overall the BRICS countries support reducing trade denominated in US dollars as a means of lowering Western economic dominance. China's influence within BRICS+ cannot be overstated — it is the largest, most powerful, and most prosperous member, and uses BRICS as an instrument to enhance its economic and political power on the global stage. A variety of internal tensions have prevented the group from forming a united front; nevertheless, members have managed to coordinate through the New Development Bank, which finances projects across the Global South with fewer economic and political conditions than those attached to World Bank lending.

The decline of Western hegemony and the collapse of the post-Second World War Eurocentric strategic alignment have accelerated the structured and systematic emergence of Asian powers. While World-Systems Theory views BRICS as semi-peripheral states ascending to challenge the core, the emergence of Asian powers can also be studied through the theoretical frameworks of power transition and hegemonic stability. However, these are non-Asian analytical frameworks that evolved in a completely different ecosystem and dynamics — and hence the need for an Asian-centric geostrategic theory-building exercise cannot remain outside the scope of studying the rise of Asian powers.

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