

The Expansion of Brics And the Emerging Geopolitical Polarization: India's Strategic Position

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Abstract: This article investigates the expansion of BRICS and its implications for India's geopolitical position and foreign policy. The article focuses on the formal adoption of the BRICS+ model at the 2023 Johannesburg Summit, where six new nations—Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Egypt, Argentina, and Ethiopia—were invited to join the bloc. India's approach to this expansion is analyzed through its doctrine of strategic autonomy, which emphasizes cautious engagement, consensus-driven decision-making, and the preservation of BRICS as a platform for the Global South. While India supports the enlargement for enhancing regional cooperation and energy security, it is cautious about the increasing influence of China within the bloc. The article further examines India's strategic interests, including energy security, financial multipolarity, and climate cooperation, and discusses the potential risks and opportunities resulting from the inclusion of new BRICS members. The analysis reveals that India's participation in BRICS+ is driven by a pragmatic desire to ensure a balanced and inclusive global order while countering the dominance of any single power. Ultimately, India's involvement in the BRICS expansion reflects its broader ambitions of advancing South-South cooperation and shaping a more equitable international system in the context of an increasingly multipolar world.

Keywords: BRICS, BRICS+ expansion, India, strategic autonomy, geopolitical dynamics, energy security, financial multipolarity, China, global governance, South-South cooperation, climate change, diplomatic strategy, international relations.

Introduction: The 21st century has witnessed a paradigmatic shift in the international system, with global power progressively diffusing from the transatlantic axis to multiple centers across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The relative decline of Western hegemony and the perceived inadequacies of institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund have catalyzed the emergence of alternative multilateral forums. Among these, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has garnered increasing attention as a vehicle for promoting the interests of the Global South and challenging the dominance of Western-centric global governance frameworks. The group's formal expansion in August 2023, which saw the admission of Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, marks a significant milestone in its institutional evolution and geopolitical relevance.

The expansion of BRICS must be situated within the broader context of an intensifying geopolitical polarization. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, the liberal international order has come under unprecedented strain, giving rise to new configurations of power based on shared economic, political, and ideological grievances. The enlarged BRICS coalition now includes members with divergent political systems, regional affiliations, and strategic goals, yet they share a common aspiration: to reform the architecture of global governance to better reflect the multipolar realities of the 21st century. This aspiration, however, is fraught with contradictions, particularly as intra-group asymmetries and rivalries—such as those between India and China—threaten the coherence of the bloc.

India's positioning within this evolving framework is both strategic and ambivalent. As one of the founding

members of BRICS, India has played a pivotal role in shaping the group's normative discourse around multipolarity, development, and South-South cooperation. Yet, India's foreign policy calculus remains rooted in a commitment to strategic autonomy, a principle that compels it to simultaneously engage with Western-led alliances such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-USA partnership), and its comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States. India's participation in both Western and non-Western multilateral arrangements underscores a deliberate hedging strategy aimed at maximizing geopolitical flexibility while safeguarding national interests in a volatile international environment.

Against this backdrop, India's response to the BRICS expansion is measured and cautious. Official statements reflect a welcome of greater inclusion of developing nations but avoid framing the move as a direct challenge to the West. This suggests that India views BRICS primarily as a complementary platform rather than an oppositional bloc. However, the inclusion of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia—historically positioned on opposite ends of the Middle East power equation—raises questions about BRICS' internal cohesion and long-term viability. Moreover, China's growing assertiveness in multilateral institutions, including within BRICS itself, may complicate India's ability to shape the agenda of the group in line with its own strategic priorities.

This paper aims to explore the geopolitical drivers behind BRICS expansion and analyze its implications for global order through the lens of India's foreign policy. Drawing upon neoclassical realist theory, the study situates India's behavior at the intersection of systemic pressures and domestic strategic culture. In doing so, the paper addresses three interrelated research questions:

1. What structural and normative forces have facilitated the recent enlargement of BRICS, and how do these reflect broader shifts in the global order?
2. How does India perceive its evolving role within BRICS amidst increasing geopolitical polarization?
3. What strategic dilemmas and opportunities does India face in reconciling its BRICS commitments with its partnerships in Western-aligned security and economic forums?

The academic significance of this study lies in its contribution to the emerging scholarship on alternative multilateralism and the geostrategic recalibration of middle powers. India's case exemplifies the dilemmas faced by states navigating a transitional international order, where alignment is increasingly fluid, and

strategic choices are shaped by a confluence of regional dynamics, global rivalries, and domestic imperatives. By critically examining India's position in the expanded BRICS architecture, this article offers insights into the challenges and prospects of multipolar global governance.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design, leveraging comparative geopolitical analysis to examine India's strategic positioning within the evolving global order. The research approach is interdisciplinary, integrating elements of political science, international relations theory, and area studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's foreign policy dynamics in the context of BRICS expansion and broader geopolitical polarization.

Given the exploratory and explanatory aims of the study, a descriptive-analytical methodology is employed. This approach enables an in-depth analysis of India's foreign policy, focusing on its responses to emerging global trends and the challenges posed by geopolitical shifts. By examining patterns, trends, and policy shifts, the research aims to uncover the strategic calculations behind India's engagement in multilateral settings such as BRICS, the Quad, and other significant global and regional alliances.

Data collection for this study primarily draws upon secondary sources, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of India's foreign policy landscape. Key sources include official documents and speeches from India's Ministry of External Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office, and other governmental bodies. These documents offer critical insights into the country's policy orientation, priorities, and diplomatic strategies. Strategic papers, such as India's "Neighborhood First" policy, "Act East Policy," and its Indo-Pacific strategy, also form the backbone of the data collection process. These policy statements help frame India's foreign policy within the larger context of its regional and global objectives.

In addition to government-issued materials, the research also incorporates scholarly literature from peer-reviewed journals and academic publications. These sources provide an academic perspective on India's geopolitical behavior, often rooted in theories of international relations and foreign policy analysis. Think tank publications, particularly from institutions such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Carnegie India, and Brookings India, offer additional policy-oriented insights into India's international engagement and its role within global institutions. Furthermore, international relations databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science, are used

to access historical and contemporary data on India's foreign policy and geopolitical strategies.

The analytical framework for this study is multi-faceted, using a combination of geopolitical analysis, constructivist theory, and neoclassical realism to interpret the data. Geopolitical analysis is central to understanding India's strategic positioning within the global system. This method examines India's diplomatic and security interactions with key global and regional powers, particularly its relationships with the United States, China, Russia, and other South Asian neighbors. By analyzing these relationships, the study offers insight into the geopolitical drivers behind India's foreign policy decisions.

Constructivist and neoclassical realist approaches are applied to assess the role of identity, domestic politics, and leadership perceptions in shaping India's foreign policy. Constructivism emphasizes the social and ideological factors influencing foreign policy, highlighting how India's national identity, historical experiences, and domestic political dynamics interact with global structural pressures. Meanwhile, neoclassical realism focuses on the role of domestic variables—such as state leadership and national power resources—in shaping a state's foreign policy decisions in the face of international system constraints.

To enhance the depth of analysis, the study also employs comparative foreign policy analysis. This method contrasts India's foreign policy behavior across different geopolitical contexts, such as its responses to regional crises in South Asia and its diplomatic positioning within multilateral organizations like BRICS. By comparing India's actions in various international settings, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the underlying factors that guide its decision-making processes.

A critical methodological tool used in this study is discourse analysis, which is applied to policy speeches and statements by Indian leadership. This approach examines how India's leaders frame issues related to global governance, multipolarity, and South-South cooperation. Discourse analysis helps reveal the rhetorical strategies India employs to advance its interests and project its strategic objectives on the global stage.

The study focuses on three distinct periods in India's foreign policy evolution. The first period, the post-Cold War era (1991–2001), marks India's transition from a state of economic isolation to a more outward-looking foreign policy approach. The second period, covering the years from 2001 to 2014, is characterized by India's growing engagement with both major powers and multilateral institutions, such as BRICS and the United

Nations Security Council. The third period, from 2014 to the present, reflects the proactive foreign policy initiatives of the Modi government, including India's strengthening of relationships with the United States and Japan, as well as its increased participation in regional and global security dialogues.

The study employs a case study approach to analyze key instances of India's foreign policy decisions. Specific cases, such as India's role in BRICS and its evolving relationships with China and Russia, are examined in detail. The research also looks at India's positioning within the Quad and its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, a key strategic area for India's national security and global influence. The inclusion of these cases ensures that the study addresses India's strategic calculations across a variety of geopolitical contexts.

While the study relies heavily on secondary data, it acknowledges several limitations. One key limitation is the absence of primary interviews with policymakers and diplomats, which could provide deeper insights into India's decision-making processes. Additionally, the study may not fully capture the immediate implications of recent geopolitical events, such as the Russia–Ukraine war or the ongoing trade tensions between China and the United States. These events, which continue to unfold, may have further ramifications for India's foreign policy trajectory.

To mitigate these limitations, the study draws upon a wide range of updated sources, including real-time media reports and the latest government statements, ensuring that the research reflects current developments in global and regional geopolitics. By incorporating a variety of data sources and employing multiple analytical frameworks, the study provides a holistic understanding of India's foreign policy in a rapidly changing international environment.

RESULTS

Milestones in BRICS Expansion

At the 15th BRICS Summit held in Johannesburg in August 2023, a major milestone in the group's evolution was achieved with the formal announcement of the adoption of a BRICS+ model. This decision marked a turning point, as BRICS, which had traditionally been an informal political and economic dialogue platform, transitioned toward becoming a potentially influential geopolitical and geo-economic coalition. The expansion was seen as a recognition of BRICS's growing importance in shaping the future global order, particularly as it moves away from the unipolar dominance of the West.

The new members invited to join the bloc—Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Egypt, Argentina, and Ethiopia—

represent a strategic shift in the group's composition. These countries are strategically important, either due to their energy resources, economic influence, or geopolitical positioning. Their inclusion will diversify BRICS's economic and political base, making it a more powerful force in global governance. For instance, Saudi Arabia and Iran are key players in the Middle East, while Argentina and Ethiopia bring new geopolitical influence in South America and Africa, respectively. This expansion could allow BRICS to shape policy agendas on energy security, climate change, and sustainable development, which are becoming increasingly important in global diplomacy.

This development highlights BRICS's evolution from a relatively narrow club of emerging powers (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) into a broader coalition that seeks to challenge the established global governance structures dominated by Western powers. The formalization of this expansion underlines the bloc's ambition to reshape international institutions and systems, such as the IMF and World Bank, which are often seen as favoring Western interests.

India's Official Position

India's official stance on BRICS expansion was notably cautious, although it publicly welcomed the decision. In his address following the announcement, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar emphasized the importance of consensus and shared objectives in guiding the expansion process. He stated:

"The expansion of BRICS should be based on consensus and shared goals."

This cautious optimism reflects India's nuanced approach to the expansion. While India has long supported multilateralism and the reform of global institutions, it is also mindful of ensuring that BRICS maintains its strategic relevance and balance. India's priority has always been to preserve BRICS as a platform for meaningful cooperation rather than allowing it to become a mere aggregation of countries.

India stressed the need for inclusivity, strategic balance, and functional cooperation rather than numerical growth for its own sake. New members should contribute substantively to the group's objectives, particularly in areas where India has a vested interest, such as trade, energy security, and international development. India's careful language and emphasis on consensus indicate that it seeks to ensure that the expansion does not dilute the group's effectiveness or its original vision of promoting a multipolar world order.

India also remains vigilant regarding the potential risks posed by the expansion. The inclusion of countries like

Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose relationships with other BRICS members are often characterized by competition and tension, poses challenges. India's vision of BRICS is one of mutual respect and equal standing, and it is wary of any one member—or a coalition of members—dominating the group's decisions. Therefore, India's cautious stance reflects its desire to retain a leadership role within BRICS while preventing the emergence of divisions that could hinder the group's ability to act cohesively on the global stage.

Emerging Zones of Competition within BRICS

While the expansion of BRICS brings new opportunities, it also introduces new dynamics and potential sources of competition within the group. A key challenge for India is the shifting balance of power, particularly the growing influence of China within BRICS. China has been a vocal proponent of the expansion, particularly in pushing for the inclusion of Iran, a country with which it shares deep political and economic ties. This move aligns with China's broader geopolitical ambitions to counter Western influence, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia.

India, on the other hand, views the inclusion of Iran with caution. Despite its historical ties with Tehran, India remains wary of China's growing influence in the region, particularly in light of China's strong partnerships with Russia and Iran. The expanding Chinese footprint within BRICS could shift the internal power dynamics, which may disadvantage India, especially in terms of policy influence on critical issues such as security, trade, and energy.

Moreover, India has been particularly sensitive to the growing Sino-Russian partnership, which is also reflected in BRICS's strategic initiatives. The Russia-China axis has proven to be a formidable force within the group, and its alignment could potentially challenge India's position as a leading voice in shaping BRICS's strategic direction. This growing bloc within BRICS could create tensions, as India seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy while balancing its relationships with both China and Russia.

The emergence of new members with divergent interests also complicates India's position. For instance, while Argentina and Egypt bring new perspectives from Latin America and Africa, the political and economic priorities of these regions often differ from those of India. Consequently, India's goal will be to navigate these internal challenges to ensure that BRICS remains an effective platform for cooperation and not a battleground for competing regional interests. India's leadership in this regard will likely depend on its ability to foster consensus while preserving its strategic interests.

The expanded BRICS group faces the task of balancing these emerging zones of competition with the collective goals of the bloc. India's role in this process will be crucial, as it seeks to guide BRICS toward a more inclusive and cooperative future while ensuring that its core values of strategic balance and multilateralism are preserved.

DISCUSSION

India's Strategic Autonomy Doctrine

India's foreign policy is fundamentally grounded in the doctrine of strategic autonomy, a concept that emphasizes independence in decision-making, while allowing for pragmatic partnerships and multi-alignment in various geopolitical contexts. This approach has allowed India to avoid being overly dependent on any single power, providing it the flexibility to act in its national interest while maintaining relationships with various global actors. Within the BRICS framework, this doctrine plays a crucial role in shaping India's approach to the bloc's expansion.

India's cautious support for the expansion of BRICS aligns with its strategic autonomy doctrine. By welcoming the enlargement but stressing the importance of consensus-based decision-making, India seeks to ensure that BRICS remains a platform that serves the interests of the Global South, and not merely a China-dominated entity. The expansion of BRICS, while presenting opportunities for India to enhance its global standing, also poses risks, particularly in terms of China's growing influence within the bloc. As China pushes for an ever-more prominent role, including its advocacy for Iran's inclusion, India is concerned about the potential for the bloc to shift towards a more Sino-centric direction.

India's emphasis on inclusivity and balanced participation underscores its desire to avoid the creation of a hierarchical structure within BRICS, where a single member or a coalition of members dominates the decision-making process. This reflects India's long-standing foreign policy orientation, which seeks to promote a multipolar world order, as opposed to one dominated by any singular power, particularly in the context of the existing global governance structures that are perceived as being disproportionately Western-centric.

India's commitment to maintaining BRICS as a platform for global south countries, rather than an exclusive arena for Chinese interests, demonstrates its broader ambition of championing the voice of developing nations. As BRICS continues to grow in membership and influence, India's role in shaping the bloc's trajectory will be critical in ensuring that it remains an effective

and equitable platform for global cooperation.

India's Interests and Strategic Calculations

India's engagement with the expanded BRICS bloc is driven by a mix of strategic interests and pragmatic calculations, particularly in the areas of energy security, financial multipolarity, and technology and climate cooperation.

One of the most immediate benefits of BRICS expansion for India is greater access to energy-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia, a major global oil producer, and Iran, with its significant energy reserves, are critical to India's energy security strategy. India's reliance on imported energy, particularly oil, makes these countries valuable partners, and their inclusion in BRICS offers India greater leverage in energy-related negotiations. This is especially important as India seeks to diversify its energy sources and reduce its dependence on traditional energy suppliers like the United States and its allies. Moreover, as part of its broader strategy to assert influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, India sees energy security as a critical element in maintaining its regional competitiveness.

Another key driver for India's support of BRICS expansion is its interest in advancing financial multipolarity. India has long been a proponent of reducing the dominance of the U.S. dollar in global financial transactions, advocating for a more diversified global financial system. Through the New Development Bank (NDB), which was established by BRICS members, India has pushed for de-dollarization and greater financial independence from Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. However, India remains cautious of becoming overly reliant on China-backed financial mechanisms. As China is the largest shareholder in the NDB, India's strategic calculation involves balancing its support for the bank's initiatives with caution regarding Chinese influence. India aims to maintain a level of control over its financial independence while using BRICS to challenge the existing global financial order.

India's engagement in the BRICS expansion is also informed by its interest in pushing forward its digital diplomacy and green growth agenda. The expansion allows India to promote its technological capabilities and leadership in the digital space, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and cybersecurity. Moreover, India views climate change as an increasingly urgent issue and seeks to use BRICS as a platform to advance its green growth agenda. The inclusion of countries like Argentina and Ethiopia, with their significant natural resources, offers India opportunities to engage in collaborative climate action,

which is central to its international diplomatic efforts. By fostering cooperation on sustainable development, India can assert its role as a leader in both the climate change discourse and the technological revolution.

India's strategic calculations are, therefore, a blend of maintaining its role as a representative of the Global South, while carefully balancing its relations with China and other key players. It seeks to ensure that BRICS serves as a platform for equitable cooperation rather than a geopolitical tool dominated by any single country. India's approach is defined by a dual imperative: on one hand, it aims to engage BRICS as a collective voice of the Global South; on the other hand, it strives to counterbalance China's growing influence, particularly in critical areas such as energy, finance, and technology.

Geopolitical Trade-Offs and Opportunities

The expansion of BRICS introduces both significant risks and substantial opportunities for India, shaping its diplomatic calculus in complex ways.

The primary risks for India arising from the BRICS expansion revolve around the dilution of its strategic autonomy and leadership role within the group. The inclusion of new members, particularly those with varying geopolitical priorities, may reduce India's influence in shaping the direction of the bloc. China's growing dominance in BRICS, coupled with its strategic alignment with Russia and Iran, represents a challenge to India's traditional role as a key leader within the group. Moreover, the expansion of BRICS could exacerbate the internal divisions among member states, making it harder for India to navigate its interests without alienating key partners. The divergent policy priorities of the new members could further complicate India's efforts to maintain the group's focus on issues of mutual concern, such as economic development, reform of global institutions, and multilateral diplomacy.

On the other hand, the expansion of BRICS also opens up significant opportunities for India to strengthen ties with key regions, particularly West Asia and Africa. Both regions have become increasingly important in India's foreign policy calculations, especially in terms of trade, energy security, and diplomatic engagement. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt in BRICS enhances India's ability to shape the future of regional cooperation, particularly in energy and security issues. Furthermore, India's leadership in BRICS+ can provide a platform to promote South-South cooperation, strengthening ties between developing countries and pushing for reforms in global governance institutions such as the UN Security Council.

India also has the opportunity to leverage BRICS as a

tool for advancing its broader geopolitical interests, particularly with regard to multipolarity and the reformation of the international order. India can use BRICS as a collective voice to advocate for changes in the global governance structures that have long been dominated by Western powers, particularly in the financial and security realms. The expanded BRICS group, with its diverse membership, offers India a chance to engage in multilateral reforms that can better represent the interests of the Global South.

India's engagement with the expanded BRICS group, therefore, reflects a pragmatic recalibration of its foreign policy strategy. It seeks to balance strategic patience with multilateral activism, positioning itself as a key player in global governance while navigating the internal complexities of the expanded bloc. By carefully managing its relationships with key BRICS members, particularly China, India aims to maximize the opportunities for cooperation while mitigating the risks of marginalization or conflict within the group.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of BRICS represents a transformative shift in the global geopolitical and economic landscape, and India's response to this shift reflects its nuanced approach to foreign policy. While welcoming the growth of the group, India's position remains guided by its strategic autonomy doctrine, emphasizing a balance between engaging with new members and safeguarding its own strategic interests. The inclusion of nations from West Asia, Africa, and Latin America offers India significant opportunities to enhance energy security, foster financial multipolarity, and strengthen its climate and technology agendas. However, the expansion also presents challenges, particularly in terms of China's increasing influence within the bloc and the potential shift in the internal balance of power.

India's cautious optimism towards BRICS expansion illustrates its desire to maintain the group as a platform for the Global South, preventing it from becoming overly dominated by any one power, especially China. India's diplomatic strategy within BRICS+ is thus characterized by a careful balancing act: maximizing cooperation with diverse partners while counteracting potential risks posed by a more China-centric bloc. India's interests in energy diversification, financial independence, and regional leadership remain central to its BRICS strategy.

Ultimately, India's engagement with BRICS expansion is a critical component of its broader foreign policy, which aims to foster a multipolar world order, promote South-South cooperation, and influence global governance reforms. As BRICS continues to grow in both membership and geopolitical significance, India's

role within the group will be pivotal in shaping the bloc's future direction and its impact on global affairs. India's calculated participation in BRICS+ reflects a pragmatic strategy of strategic patience and multilateral cooperation, reinforcing its commitment to advancing the interests of emerging economies and contributing to a more equitable international system.

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