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Issue Brief

India's BRICS Presidency: Challenges and Opportunities

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Summary

India has articulated a vision for BRICS structured around four main pillars: Resilience (supply chain, health), Innovation (digital public infrastructure, AI, fintech), Cooperation (reformed multilateralism, deepening partnership), and Sustainability (green finance, energy transition) while emphasising people-centric development and a 'humanity-first' approach to global governance.

Introduction

India assumed the BRICS Presidency on 1 January 2026. At the unveiling of the Logo, Theme and Website of India's Presidency on 13 January 2026, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated that "India's BRICS Chairship will seek to bring together the potential of BRICS countries for the greater global welfare".

India has assumed this responsibility at a time when BRICS has been receiving adverse attention from President Donald Trump. The polarisation between the East and the West, as well as between the North and the South, has further intensified since Trump assumed office for the second time in January 2025. Fissures in the Transatlantic Partnership between Europe and the US, as well as within NATO, have significantly enhanced uncertainty and unpredictability in global affairs.

Alongside the unprecedented uncertainty in global relations, particularly in security and the economy, the last few years have witnessed an expansion of BRICS membership, leading to greater diversity in the body's functioning. This presents its own problems and challenges in reaching consensus on several significant political, economic and strategic issues.

The task will hence be cut out for India to both manage the internal contradictions within the BRICS Grouping and also to foster positive and collaborative relations with the outside world, particularly with the G7 countries and other members of the developed world, as well as the large cohort of the Global South, which are not member states or partner countries of the BRICS. This challenge will, however, also present opportunities to emerge as a viable and effective 'bridge builder' between the BRICS and the Global South, as well as with the Western developed countries.

India began its BRICS Presidency in 2026, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi, addressing the Summit in Rio de Janeiro in July 2025, stated that India would give a "new form" to the BRICS grouping during its presidency. He proposed redefining BRICS as 'Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability'. PM Modi emphasised a people-centric approach, drawing parallels with India's G-20 presidency, in which the Global South was prioritised. He affirmed that India would advance BRICS with a focus on "humanity first", underscoring the need for collective global efforts to address shared challenges, including pandemics and climate change.

The Evolution and Expansion of BRICS

In 2001, Goldman Sachs banker Jim O'Neill created the acronym 'BRIC' to refer to Brazil, Russia, India and China—countries with large populations, geographic areas and economies—that he predicted would soon have a significant impact on the global economy. The Group transformed into a political grouping in 2009, when leaders of the four countries held their first summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia. South Africa joined a year later. The primary objective of the grouping, at its inception, was to secure a greater voice and space for emerging economies within the evolving financial and trading system.

The BRICS grouping expanded, increasing its membership from the original five to eleven at the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2023. Four out of the six new members, viz. UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia and Iran joined the grouping on 1 January 2024. Argentina, however, declined the offer after the election of its new President, Javier Milei, in November 2023 and withdrew from its planned entry into the organisation. Saudi Arabia, the sixth country, has not yet decided to join BRICS, although its representatives continue to participate in some lower-level official and technical meetings. Indonesia was invited as a new member in 2024 and joined the Group on 1 January 2025.

The eleven BRICS countries (including Saudi Arabia) have an estimated total population of 3.9 billion, representing approximately 48 per cent of the global population. All five original BRICS states are members of the G20, whereas only Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, inducted as new members in 2024 and 2025, respectively, are among the world's top 20 economies.

The total GDP of the 11 BRICS nations in nominal dollar terms as of 2026 is over US$ 32 trillion, accounting for 28–30 per cent of the global GDP. Compared with this, the G7 accounts for US$ 54.52 trillion, representing 43 per cent of global GDP in nominal terms. The picture gets reversed when computing the figures in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms. The figure for BRICS11 is US$ 78 trillion, representing more than 40 per cent of global GDP. The corresponding figure for the G7 is US$ 60.95 trillion, accounting for 27.8 per cent of global GDP. The combined economic output of the five original BRICS members, measured in purchasing power parity, first exceeded that of the US-led G7 in 2022. The new BRICS members bring other attributes besides raw GDP to the bloc. With the addition of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the UAE and Iran, BRICS increased its share of global oil production to more than 40 per cent.

It is a measure of the importance that the member countries attach to this organisation that BRICS Summits have been held annually without interruption since their inception in 2009. No leader has ever missed any Summit. This is in sharp contrast to the summits of some other groupings, whose meetings are held after long interregnums.

Russia, which assumed the BRICS presidency in 2024, announced that more than 30 countries had expressed interest in joining the organisation. The rush to join BRICS was seen less as an outright rejection of Western norms and partners and more as a move to hedge and create new options beyond those available during the era of undisputed Western global dominance. It was decided at the Kazan Summit in 2024 to create another category of 'partner countries'. The BRICS decided to focus on integrating the five new members (including Saudi Arabia) that joined in January 2024. The enlargement strategy has enabled a more gradual expansion process, allowing the bloc to assess how new members align with its goals before further expansion. The partner countries may participate in discussions at all levels, but they may not vote.

The growing East-West confrontation in recent years, particularly between the US and China on trade and technology issues, and between the West and Russia on account of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has energised China and Russia to expand the BRICS grouping and move it into a pronouncedly anti-Western corner. This is not to India's liking. This position is not supported by many new member countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which maintain strong ties with the US. However, Russia, China and Iran seek to steer the grouping towards an unmistakable anti-Western stance.

India as a Bridge-Builder

India finds itself at a unique geopolitical crossroads. New Delhi has positioned itself as the 'Bridge Builder'—the primary link between the established Western order (the Global North) and the rising powers and developing countries of the Global South. India is possibly the only country in the world that straddles major political, security and economic divides between the North and the South (Developed and Developing) and between the East and the West, with the US and Europe on one side pitted against Russia and China on the other.

India is the only South Asian member of the QUAD, whose other members are the US, Japan and Australia. It has also been a regular invitee to the G7 Summits for the last several years. On the other hand, it is an active member of both the SCO and

BRICS, which comprise emerging economies Russia and China, as well as members of the Global South.

India's global influence has grown significantly over the last decade due to its political stability, robust democracy, free and fair elections, and expanding economy. Today, India is the world's fourth-largest economy, poised to become the third-largest over the next two years. It is the world's fastest-growing major economy with expected GDP growth of around 7–8 per cent in the coming years. Its foreign policy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment has significantly enhanced its prestige and standing.

Its initiatives, such as the 'Vaccine Maitri' during the COVID-19 pandemic, under which it shared more than 300 million vaccine doses with developing countries, most of them on a grant basis, and supplied medicines to more than 150 countries, have significantly enhanced its reputation and prestige, particularly among developing countries. In the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen: "When India succeeds, the world is more stable, prosperous, and secure—and we all benefit". She emphasised that a strong, democratic India is a vital global partner, with its growth and rising influence contributing to a more secure and balanced world order.

India's foreign policy ethos of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One Family), which formed the basis of India's Motto of 'One Earth, One Family, One Future' during its G20 Presidency in 2023, has helped India to emerge as a 'Vishwamitra' (Friend to the World). Through its policies, initiatives and actions, India has earned the trust and confidence of the world. The bold, decisive and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Modi has played a seminal role in elevating India's prestige and stature on the world stage. Since India's G20 Presidency in 2023, developed countries have also recognised the imperative to engage with the Global South on an equal footing.

For this reason, Japan, which held the G7 Presidency in 2023, worked assiduously to coordinate its actions and policies with India in its capacity as the G20 Chair. Earlier this year, French President Emmanuel Macron, who holds the G7 Chair for 2026, made a deliberate and high-profile public offer to PM Modi, framing India as the essential bridge between the G7 and BRICS. This creates a unique window for collaboration.

Macron suggested that both BRICS and G7 should work to prevent 'Global Fragmentation'. He said that the G7 should not be an anti-China or anti-BRICS Club, and that BRICS should not be anti-G7. He invited PM Modi to use India's leadership

of BRICS to foster formal coordination between the two Blocs to prevent the world from sliding into a new Cold War. This collaboration would be a strategic hedge against Trump's recent pressures on both the EU and the BRICS. This would be designed to preserve sovereignty and maintain independence in an increasingly divisive world.

The year 2025 has been a rough year for India, primarily on account of its strained relations with USA, marked by the imposition of 50 per cent tariffs on its exports to the US market, the US's cozying up to Pakistan, pressure on India to weaken its energy and military ties with Russia, pushing the Quad on the backburner, pressure on H1B visa holders, etc. India, however, has not allowed this to slow its pace of instituting domestic reforms or diversifying its economic partnerships.

This resulted in the successful conclusion of several Free Trade Agreements with diverse countries and entities in 2025, including the UK, New Zealand, the EFTA (European Free Trade Association), Oman and others. The pinnacle of the process of economic diversification was achieved in early 2026, with the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union after 18 years of negotiations on 27 January 2026. This was soon followed by an Interim Trade Agreement with the US, announced unexpectedly by President Trump after a conversation with PM Modi on 3 February 2026. These developments have come as a shot in the arm for India as it navigates the increasing churn and flux in global political, security, strategic and economic affairs.

Conclusion

The international environment in which India must now steer and promote its interests and those of the Global South is, however, becoming more demanding. PM Modi has articulated a vision for BRICS structured around four main pillars: Resilience (supply chain, health), Innovation (digital public infrastructure, AI, fintech), Cooperation (reformed multilateralism, deepening partnership), and Sustainability (green finance, energy transition) while emphasising people-centric development and a 'humanity-first' approach to global governance.

India's success as the 2026 BRICS Chair will depend on its ability to keep the group focused on functional cooperation (health, climate finance, technology, multilateral reform and trade) rather than ideological warfare. By acting as the 'sensible middle', India will ensure that it remains indispensable to both the West and the Global South. Its sterling performance and achievements during its G20 Presidency would give it the requisite confidence and determination to succeed in this challenging but rewarding role.

About the Author

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