

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Is BRICS Becoming a Nuclear Minilateral?

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S*ummary*

The Delhi BRICS Declaration reflects consensus on the issues concerning all three pillars of the NPT—disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Nuclear issues are gaining more traction as part of BRICS Summit diplomacy. BRICS is a formidable grouping. It represents close to 50 per cent of the global population, includes the world’s largest emerging economies, and accounts for 40 per cent of global GDP and 26 per cent of global trade. The eleven member countries do carry sufficient political clout in the international order. BRICS even represents a prominent membership and leadership from the Global South.

If viewed through a nuclear lens, it comprises three nuclear-weapon states, two of which are P5 members. The third one aspires to be and makes a strong case for the same. Ten out of eleven BRICS member states are parties to the NPT, either in the form of Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) or Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS)—the treaty being the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime and, by extension, the global nuclear order. The remaining exception is India: a non-party to the NPT, and with its ‘nuclear exceptionalism’, it has become a significant player in the global nuclear order.

Five of the eleven member states of BRICS are parties to existing nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZ), namely Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia and Indonesia. As of 2026, two BRICS countries are parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)—South Africa and Indonesia. Brazil is a signatory but has not ratified the TPNW. In addition, nine of the eleven BRICS members are also formal members of the Conference on Disarmament.

Despite divergences among State positions, BRICS has the potential to become a strong nuclear minilateral. By its own admission, the BRICS ‘cooperation’ agenda has expanded considerably from its initial focus on economic issues of mutual concern. Over the course of 20 years, BRICS has absorbed the goal of building collective synergies on addressing issues of non-traditional security threats including the fight against terrorism, climate change, energy security, the international economic and financial situation, telecommunications, agriculture, labour and employment, international financial architecture, trade, and the WTO.¹

In the recently concluded 18th BRICS Summit, the New Delhi Declaration was unanimously adopted. The declaration’s 140 paragraphs, issued under India’s chairmanship, reflect the countries’ intent to forge consensus on global matters of importance and urgency in a fragmented world. As PM Modi said, BRICS has

¹ [“About BRICS”](#), BRICS Official Website.

reached a “coming of age” moment and called on the Global South to become a “rule-shaper” rather than accept rules set elsewhere.²

Among other issues, BRICS has also reached a consensus on nuclear issues. Paragraphs 25, 29, 58 and 66 of the declaration address nuclear issues in several contexts. Foremost, it speaks of ‘invigorating the system of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation’, with particular attention to the contribution of nuclear-weapon-free zones.³ Citing their significance, the Bloc has not only extended its support but has also called on countries to engage constructively on a Middle East NWFZ.

These efforts represent legally binding commitments in which NNWS states provide assurances for banning the development, manufacturing, control, possession, testing and stationing of nuclear weapons in a given area. In addition, these commitments are also verifiable. In other words, the NWFZ represents a regional and “somewhat irreversible” disarmament effort; perhaps not absolute, because, in the truest sense, irreversibility would imply dismantling efforts that may even go beyond the scope of the Treaty itself. In addition, NWFZs are fundamentally linked to Negative Security Assurances (NSAs). The sustainability of the NWFZs is also attached to the protocol of the NSAs, wherein an NWS provides the assurances to ‘never to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the NWFZ’.

While the ratification of the NSA protocols remains uneven across regions of the NWFZ, they form an important part of the norm of nuclear restraint on the part of the NWS. Furthermore, the Agenda of the NSAs have been a part of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) since 1979, ‘culminating in Working Groups until 1983 and Ad-hoc Committees between 1984 and 1994 and again in 1998’.⁴

While the call for the universalisation of the NSA protocols has existed for a long time, translating it into a nuanced, universal, unconditional and legally binding instrument remains far from reality. The NAM group of countries that are also parties to the NPT has called for a legally binding NSA to be made into a universal treaty. In light of recent events around a ‘military solution’ to containing nuclear proliferation, this is a significant show of consensus.

² [**“BRICS Summit 2026: What Are the Key Takeaways?”**](#), *Al Jazeera*, 13 September 2026.

³ [**“BRICS New Delhi Declaration: Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability”**](#), *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 12 September 2026.

Paragraph 29 of the Delhi Declaration, by highlighting “serious concern over deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure ...in violation of international law”, has made an obvious reference to the case concerned.⁴ This will likely shape the approach to non-proliferation and disarmament issues so far as nuclear multilateralism is concerned. In addition, in the backdrop of a no-consensus outcome document at the recent NPT Review Conference 2026, taking cognizance of these issues reflects nuclear sensibility.

However, this is not the first time nuclear-related issues have been viewed. A decade ago, at the 8th BRICS Summit, the Goa Declaration also highlighted the role of nuclear energy towards meeting commitments under the Paris Climate Change Agreement (2015) and thereby stressed the need for ‘access to technology about civilian nuclear energy capacity’.⁵ More recently, at the 15th BRICS Summit in 2023, the Johannesburg II Declaration not only stressed the need to mitigate proliferation in accordance with international law but also called for preserving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁶

The same declaration also highlighted the potential, experience and prospects of nuclear medicine and radiopharmaceuticals, and welcomed the establishment of the working group on nuclear medicine. The recent BRICS Delhi declaration also carried forward the theme of nuclear medicine, indicating stronger cooperation among BRICS member states. The role of nuclear energy is again highlighted as an important part of energy diversification strategies. This is a routine continuation of the BRICS agenda as an area of cooperation.

What remains significant, in substance and symbolism, is the BRICS Delhi Declaration's approach to nuclear issues. The Declaration has touched all three pillars of the NPT—disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The consensus covers all three aspects. If this is not becoming a nuclear minilateral, what else is?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [“Goa Declaration at 8th BRICS Summit”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 16 October 2016.

⁶ [“15th BRICS Summit: Johannesburg II Declaration”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 August 2023.

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