

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

What India's BRICS Reset Means for African Non-Alignment

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S*ummary*

The real test for BRICS remains whether it can deliver meaningful gains for Africa in financing, industrial cooperation, technology and trade, while giving African members a genuine role in shaping its agenda.

The 18th BRICS Summit held in New Delhi on 12–13 September 2026 concluded with the unanimous adoption of the New Delhi Declaration, a comprehensive 140-point document.¹ Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first visit to India in seven years. This was also his first visit since the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, which brought India–China relations to their lowest point in decades.² Russian President Vladimir Putin also attended the summit. But the more consequential development for Africa received far less coverage than the Xi visit.

South Africa (a BRICS member since 2011), Ethiopia and Egypt (since January 2024) took part as full BRICS members with a vote, while Nigeria and Uganda participated as partner countries. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa utilised the platform to push for greater intra-BRICS trade, African industrialisation and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) linked infrastructure, and to call for global oversight of artificial intelligence.³ African presence at the summit does more than add numbers to the roster. It raises a larger question: what does non-alignment mean in a multipolar world, once African governments sit inside, rather than outside the platform that multipolar competition has produced?

For much of the post-colonial period, African governments sought to preserve manoeuvring room by avoiding formal alignment with competing great-power blocs. They tended to extract benefits from several external partners simultaneously. The New Delhi summit offered an opportunity to consider what that strategy means when African governments are themselves members of a platform dominated by India, China and Russia. This question is particularly consequential when two of those powers are simultaneously trying to stabilise their own bilateral relationship.

A Reset Conducted in Public

The New Delhi summit carried unusual symbolic weight. India hosted the BRICS summit again in 2026, five years after its previous chairmanship, at a moment when it was also trying to stabilise relations with China after a prolonged period of military tension, political distrust and economic de-risking. The October 2024 agreement on patrolling arrangements in Eastern Ladakh had already led to

¹ [“BRICS New Delhi Declaration: Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability \(September 12, 2026\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 September 2026.

² Aleesha Sam, [“‘Partners, Nor Rivals’: Xi, Modi Push for Stronger India-China Ties at BRICS Summit 2026”](#), *The Free Press Journal*, 14 September 2026.

³ [“SA Calls for Global Oversight of Artificial Intelligence”](#), *South African Government News Agency*, 13 September 2026.

disengagement from the remaining friction points of 2020.⁴ At the same time, diplomatic and military mechanisms for managing the boundary question have continued to operate.

Xi's presence in New Delhi therefore carried significance beyond the optics of a leaders' summit. In their bilateral meetings on the sidelines, Xi described the relationship as having reached a “new elevation”, building on the “restart” that began in Kazan in 2024 and its continuation at Tianjin in 2025. Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked the “three mutuals”: mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest. Both leaders agreed that “differences should not become disputes”.⁵ The language was carefully calibrated but it also confirmed a long-held assumption: managed competition and institutionalised communication are once again becoming preferable to sustained confrontation, even if the strategic distrust underlying the relationship remains substantial.

For African governments, however, this recalibration matters elsewhere. It is taking place inside an institution in which African representation has expanded considerably since 2024. That makes the India–China relationship something African governments now help negotiate from within BRICS, not merely watch from outside.

From External Hedging to Internal Membership

Older conceptions of African non-alignment, from Bandung to the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement, were built on preserving sovereignty and policy autonomy. Maintaining distance from great-power blocs was the means, not the goal. In contemporary Africa, that logic has evolved. It is often described as active non-alignment or strategic hedging, in which governments seek different partners while avoiding excessive dependence on any single external power. A government can work with one power on security, with another on infrastructure and a third on maritime cooperation, recalibrating these relationships in response to changing circumstances.

BRICS membership introduces a different institutional condition: South Africa, Ethiopia and Egypt now participate directly in BRICS' decision-making and political consultations. Nigeria and Uganda, meanwhile, occupy an intermediate position as partner countries. This distinction matters because external hedging is inherently reversible. Governments can adjust the intensity of individual relationships relatively quickly. Membership, by contrast, does not eliminate such flexibility; it

⁴ [“In a Major Breakthrough, India and China Reach Agreement on Patrolling along LAC in Eastern Ladakh”](#), *Deccan Herald*, 21 October 2024.

⁵ [“Modi, Xi Agree ‘Differences Should Not Become Disputes’”](#), *The Star*, 13 September 2026.

places strategic autonomy within a framework of sustained participation, consultation and consensus-building. BRICS membership may even expand African strategic autonomy by providing another institutional platform from which governments can diversify their external partnerships.

The complication, though, is that autonomy exercised from within an institution also requires navigating the expectations, rivalries and compromises that the institution generates. Now that African governments have gained a seat at the table, the expectations attached to that seat have also increased. Non-alignment has not disappeared. It has only moved indoors.

No Uniform African Voice within BRICS

The difficulties of constructing a common African position became apparent in September 2024 when disagreements over UN Security Council (UNSC) reform prevented the BRICS foreign ministers from producing a joint statement.⁶ Gustavo de Carvalho of the International Peace Institute has argued that Africa's expanding footprint in BRICS has not been matched by any mechanism for its members to coordinate a common position, meaning a larger seat at the table has not translated into more collective say.⁷

Indeed, some of Africa's most persistent diplomatic disagreements can be reproduced within institutions designed to amplify their collective voice. The Egypt–Ethiopia dispute over the Nile and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is an obvious example.⁸ Multipolarity may widen the room available to African governments but it also risks reproducing African rivalries within the very institutions intended to strengthen the Global South. For African members, therefore, representation within BRICS does not automatically translate into collective leverage.

What the Declaration Actually Delivers

The text of the New Delhi Declaration was negotiated primarily around the war in West Asia and the reset between Delhi and Beijing. However, Africa received a substantial mention in the declaration text. Although no single reference to Africa is transformative on its own, reading these references together reveals an important

⁶ Sarang Shidore, “[Is BRICS Losing its Mojo?](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 September 2026.

⁷ Gustavo de Carvalho, “[Diversification with Coordination: The Scope for a Collective African Voice in BRICS](#)”, International Peace Institute, 21 July 2026.

⁸ Marew Abebe Salemot and Namhla Thando Matshanda, “[Ethiopia and Egypt are Cooperating in BRICS, Even as Tensions Simmer over the Nile](#)”, The London School of Economic and Political Science, 11 August 2026.

pattern. African concerns now closely align with BRICS priorities, particularly on historical justice and a greater institutional voice. But on issues that require choosing sides, the language is intentionally vague.

The clearest example is on global governance. BRICS members are committed to “greater and more meaningful participation and representation” for developing countries, “especially from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean” in international decision-making.⁹ The declaration also noted that no woman has ever led the United Nations as Secretary-General and only two nationals from Africa and Asia have ever held the post.¹⁰ Naming that fact in a leaders’ declaration clearly indicates that the demand for representation is no longer a general grievance.

The New Delhi Declaration also welcomed UN General Assembly Resolution 80/250, which declared “the trafficking of enslaved Africans and the racialised chattel enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity”.¹¹ The leaders advocated for the full implementation of UNGA Resolution 79/115 of December 2024, which calls for eradicating colonialism “in all its forms and manifestations”.¹² This is exactly the language which African governments and the African Union (AU) have emphasised for many years.

On Security Council reform, the declaration recognised the “legitimate aspirations” not just of developing countries generally but of African countries specifically.¹³ It reiterated the AU’s own negotiating position on Council reform since 2005 as reflected in the Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration. Whether this could change the Security Council's permanent membership is a separate matter.

Other references to Africa in the declaration are much more concrete. The declaration reiterated BRICS support for Ethiopia’s accession bid to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The members also acknowledged China for “expanding its zero-tariff treatment to cover 53 African countries with which it has diplomatic ties”. That fact says more about Beijing’s own trade diplomacy than about any BRICS-wide initiative.

The broader focus, however, remains on African integration into global trade and value chains. The declaration also reaffirmed BRICS support for the Kimberley Process. It noted the participation of African diamond-mining nations in the “Informal BRICS Cooperation Platform” to ensure free trade in rough diamonds and

⁹ [“BRICS New Delhi Declaration: Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability \(September 12, 2026\)”](#), no. 1, paragraph 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., paragraph 9.

¹¹ Ibid., paragraph 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., paragraph 13.

the sustainable development of the global diamond industry. BRICS members also welcomed Ethiopia's candidacy, endorsed by the AU as its sole nominee, for one of the additional seats on the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council, reserved for under-represented regions.

A glaring omission in the declaration is its lack of engagement with issues relating to African security. In Paragraph 23, the African Union peace support operations are listed as an area where BRICS “agrees to explore avenues for cooperation”. This vague phrasing commits the BRICS grouping to few actionable initiatives. On the crisis in Sudan, the concern is more direct. It expresses concern about the humanitarian crisis and the risk of extremism spreading beyond Sudan's borders. Yet when it comes to who should address the crisis, the onus falls on a familiar principle: “African solution to African problems”.¹⁴ The principle carries a long and contested history.¹⁵ External powers have invoked the principle before. More often than not, they have done so at exactly the moment they wished to avoid deeper involvement themselves.

The remaining references to Africa in the declaration are less binding. The grouping acknowledged a joint proposal from South Africa and Brazil for establishing an international panel on inequality.¹⁶ In Paragraph 16, the declaration points to the Asian-African origins of the 1955 Bandung Conference. It acknowledges it as a touchstone for the “fairer, more inclusive” multilateral order BRICS claims to want.¹⁷ Moreover, the declaration also extended BRICS support to Ethiopia's incoming Presidency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP32.¹⁸ The declaration also credits the African Union's accession to the G20 forum under India's 2023 Presidency.¹⁹ The BRICS grouping also reaffirmed South Africa's status as a G20 founding member.²⁰

Overall, BRICS' New Delhi Declaration often invoked African aspirations, institutions and historical grievances. These issues helped to reinforce BRICS' own grievances about the existing international order. That pattern, however, shifts once BRICS is asked to commit resources, take institutional risks or arbitrate among African members' own competing demands. The Sudan case illustrates this. In those instances, the declaration avoids providing any genuine commitments.

¹⁴ Ibid., paragraph 37.

¹⁵ Nkosingiphile Mkhize, Sobongile Moyo and Sipho Mahoa, “[African Solutions to African Problems: A Narrative of Corruption in Postcolonial Africa](#)”, *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2024.

¹⁶ “[BRICS New Delhi Declaration: Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability \(September 12, 2026\)](#)”, no. 1, paragraph 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., paragraph 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., paragraph 107.

¹⁹ Ibid., paragraph 116.

²⁰ Ibid.

What a Calmer India–China Relationship Means for Africa

The more consequential question concerns the relationship between BRICS’s major Asian powers and the interests of its African members. A more stable India–China relationship could strengthen BRICS’ institutional functioning by making cooperation on trade, development finance and global economic governance easier.²¹ For African governments, this could create opportunities if BRICS institutions become more effective at delivering financing and economic cooperation.

There is another possibility. A significant element of African bargaining power has historically derived from competition among external partners. India and China are only two of several powers competing for African markets, strategic influence and diplomatic support. Still, their rivalry has enabled African governments to diversify partnerships and negotiate better terms of engagement.

A sustained India–China rapprochement could reduce one source of competitive leverage. It would not eliminate African agency or wider competition among external powers. But governments used to leveraging differences between Delhi and Beijing may find that avenue of manoeuvre less valuable if the two Asian powers are willing to cooperate. What matters for Africa is not the reset itself but whether African governments can convert a less competitive external environment into institutional influence, or risk their bargaining power shrinking further.

Holding the Seat

Ultimately, the India–China reset received much of the coverage at the Delhi summit. For African policymakers, the more important question is what the summit produced beyond the bilateral optics. The real test remains: can BRICS deliver meaningful gains for Africa in financing, industrial cooperation, technology and trade while giving African members a genuine role in shaping its agenda?²²

Equally important is whether, going ahead, African members can preserve their bargaining leverage as India and China seek to stabilise their relationship. Representation alone is not sufficient. African non-alignment is now practised through BRICS ministerial and consensus documents as much as through bilateral hedging. That shift changes what the strategy demands: less about staying outside competing camps, more about holding ground inside a room built by others. Having a seat at the table should not mean surrendering the freedom to move.

²¹ Mohamed Karim, “[Steadier China-India Ties Boost BRICS’ Development Agenda](#)”, China International Communications Group, 17 September 2026.

²² Khumo Raphuti, “[What Did Africa Actually Get From BRICS?](#)”, *Time Africa*, 14 September 2026.

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