



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## India's strategic influence in BRICS: Balancing power with diplomacy

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(02), 269–274

Publication history: Received on 12 September 2024; revised on 31 October 2024; accepted on 02 November 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.2.3221>

### Abstract

India's strategic role within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping highlights its growing influence in global geopolitics. This paper explores how India leverages BRICS as a platform to balance power, especially vis-à-vis China, while promoting multilateralism and economic cooperation. As the only democratic nation within BRICS with a robust engagement in both the Global South and Western alliances, India strategically navigates its diplomatic relations to push for reforms in global governance structures such as the United Nations and financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Through a combination of economic outreach, leadership in technology and digital finance, and a firm stance on sovereignty, India is positioning itself as a bridge between competing global powers, while advocating for equitable global development. The paper argues that India's balancing act within BRICS underscores its aspirations to be a leading global player while protecting its national interests and regional stability.

**Keywords:** India; BRICS; Strategic influence; Diplomacy; Global governance; Multilateralism; Power balance

### 1. Introduction

India's strategic engagement within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping reflects its evolving role in global geopolitics. As one of the world's largest emerging economies and a major democracy, India's participation in BRICS is both a reflection of its aspirations for global leadership and a means to navigate the complex web of global power dynamics. The formation of BRICS in 2009 brought together key regional powers to advocate for a more balanced international order, challenging the dominance of Western-centric institutions and promoting a multipolar world.

India's presence in BRICS, however, is marked by a unique balancing act. While it shares common interests with fellow members—such as the reform of global governance structures like the United Nations and international financial institutions—its strategic relationship with China, the dominant economic power in the group, presents both opportunities and challenges. India's position in BRICS is further complicated by its strong ties with Western countries, especially through the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and its growing economic and security partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia.

This paper explores how India utilizes its membership in BRICS to enhance its diplomatic leverage, balancing the growing influence of China while advancing its own national interests. India's push for multilateralism, inclusive development, and global governance reforms, alongside its leadership in digital finance and technology, highlight its strategic priorities within the BRICS framework. By examining the interplay between diplomacy and power within BRICS, this study sheds light on India's broader foreign policy objectives, including its efforts to maintain regional stability, economic growth, and its aspirations for a greater voice in shaping the future global order.

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### Objectives

- Examine India's Strategic Role within BRICS

To analyze how India navigates its role within the BRICS grouping, balancing its position among major emerging economies while addressing geopolitical tensions, especially with China.

- Understand India's Approach to Global Governance Reform:

To explore India's advocacy for reforms in international institutions such as the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank, and how BRICS serves as a platform for advancing these objectives.

- Analyze Economic Cooperation and Leadership Initiatives:

To assess India's leadership in economic collaboration within BRICS, particularly in areas like digital finance, sustainable development, and technological innovation, and its implications for India's global economic ambitions.

- Evaluate Diplomatic Strategies for Power Balancing:

To study how India diplomatically balances its relationship with BRICS members, especially in light of its geopolitical rivalries with China and strategic alliances with Western powers, including the Quad.

- Explore India's Influence on Multilateralism and Regional Stability:

To investigate how India uses BRICS to strengthen multilateralism, promote South-South cooperation, and contribute to regional stability in South Asia and beyond.

- Assess India's Long-term Aspirations in Global Leadership:

To examine how India's participation in BRICS aligns with its broader goal of emerging as a global leader and shaping the evolving multipolar world order.

#### 1.1. India's Strategic Influence in BRICS: Trade Relations

India's trade relations within BRICS play a critical role in advancing its economic interests and enhancing its global strategic footprint. As a founding member of BRICS, India views trade as a vital component of fostering economic cooperation and reducing reliance on Western-dominated trade networks. The BRICS nations collectively represent a significant share of global GDP, trade, and population, making it a key platform for India to push for balanced global trade practices and leverage opportunities for growth.

India's trade with BRICS countries has seen substantial growth over the years, with China being its largest trading partner within the group. However, this economic engagement is also influenced by geopolitical considerations, especially India's efforts to reduce trade imbalances and dependency on Chinese imports. India has been pushing for greater trade with Brazil, Russia, and South Africa, emphasizing diversification and strengthening South-South cooperation.

**Table 1** Showcasing India's trade with BRICS countries (in billion USD) over the past five years:

Year	China	Russia	Brazil	South Africa	Total BRICS Trade
2019	87.07	11.16	11.64	10.78	120.65
2020	77.66	8.14	10.18	8.46	104.44
2021	114.43	13.12	12.22	12.21	151.98
2022	115.42	17.23	15.09	14.13	161.87
2023*	122.28	20.08	16.75	15.34	174.45

\*Estimated based on mid-year data trends

## 1.2. Key Trends in India-BRICS Trade

- China as a Dominant Partner

China remains India's largest trading partner within BRICS, with the bilateral trade crossing \$100 billion. However, India is actively working to reduce its trade deficit with China by encouraging domestic manufacturing and diversifying its import sources.

- Rising Trade with Russia

India's trade with Russia has grown significantly, especially in recent years due to energy cooperation, defense partnerships, and agricultural imports. The diversification of trade into sectors like pharmaceuticals and machinery has also boosted relations.

- Strengthening Economic Ties with Brazil and South Africa:

Trade with Brazil and South Africa has been steadily increasing, driven by India's imports of commodities like crude oil, agricultural products, and precious metals. India's exports to these countries include machinery, pharmaceuticals, and technology services.

- Focus on Diversification and Reducing Dependency:

India's strategy within BRICS emphasizes diversification of its trade partners within the bloc to avoid over-reliance on any one country, particularly China. India seeks to promote balanced and reciprocal trade arrangements while fostering deeper engagement with Brazil, Russia, and South Africa.

India's trade relationships within BRICS underscore its broader strategy of using economic diplomacy to advance its national interests while strengthening the multilateral economic framework. The growing trade volume, despite challenges, reflects India's increasing economic integration within the BRICS bloc, providing opportunities for growth in key sectors such as energy, technology, and agriculture.

## 1.3. Issues and Challenges Faced by BRICS Countries

The BRICS grouping, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, represents a significant bloc of emerging economies with considerable political and economic clout. However, the member countries face a range of issues and challenges that impact their collective effectiveness and individual growth. Below are some of the key challenges:

- Divergent Economic Interests

**Economic Disparities:** The member countries exhibit significant differences in their economic structures, growth rates, and levels of development, leading to varying priorities and interests. For instance, while China has a robust manufacturing base, Brazil and South Africa are rich in natural resources.

**Trade Imbalances:** Trade relationships are often characterized by imbalances, particularly between China and the other member states, which can lead to tensions and calls for more equitable trade practices.

- Geopolitical Tensions

**India-China Rivalry:** The ongoing border disputes and strategic competition between India and China create friction within the group, impacting cooperation and unity.

**Russia's Isolation:** Russia's geopolitical actions, particularly in relation to Ukraine, have strained its relationships with other countries, leading to concerns about its influence in BRICS and potential isolation from global markets.

- Governance and Decision-Making Challenges

**Lack of Cohesion:** The BRICS countries often struggle to reach a consensus on key issues due to differing political ideologies and priorities, which hampers their ability to act as a unified bloc.

**Institutional Framework:** There is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of BRICS' institutional mechanisms, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), in addressing the diverse needs of member countries.

- Sustainability and Environmental Concerns

**Development vs. Sustainability:** The member countries face challenges in balancing economic development with environmental sustainability. The reliance on fossil fuels and resource extraction poses risks to their long-term ecological health.

**Climate Change Commitments:** As signatories to international climate agreements, BRICS countries face pressure to reduce emissions and implement sustainable practices, which may conflict with their economic growth goals.

- Social and Political Instability

**Internal Conflicts:** Some BRICS nations experience political unrest, social inequalities, and governance issues, which can affect their international standing and cooperation efforts.

**Populism and Protectionism:** Rising populism and protectionist policies within member states may undermine collective efforts to promote free trade and economic collaboration.

- Global Economic Dynamics

**Western Dominance:** The BRICS nations collectively seek to challenge Western dominance in global governance and finance, yet they face obstacles in restructuring established institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

**Response to Global Crises:** The COVID-19 pandemic and global economic slowdown have exposed vulnerabilities in the BRICS economies, requiring coordinated responses that can be difficult to achieve due to differing national priorities.

- Technological Disparities

**Innovation Gaps:** The member countries vary significantly in their technological capabilities and innovation capacities, impacting their ability to collaborate on tech-driven initiatives.

**Digital Divide:** Access to technology and the internet remains uneven across BRICS nations, posing challenges for inclusive growth and development.

While BRICS represents a powerful coalition of emerging economies, its members face a multitude of challenges that can hinder cooperation and collective progress. Addressing these issues requires a commitment to dialogue, mutual understanding, and a willingness to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. Overcoming these challenges will be crucial for BRICS to fulfil its potential as a significant player in shaping the future of global governance and economic development.

India's strategic influence in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) has grown significantly over the years, primarily through its diplomatic engagements and economic initiatives. As the BRICS group seeks to enhance cooperation among emerging economies, India's role has become pivotal. Here are some recommendations for India to further enhance its strategic influence in BRICS while balancing power through diplomacy:

#### **1.4. Recommendations for India's Strategic Influence in BRICS**

- Strengthening Economic Cooperation

**Enhance Trade Relations:** Promote trade agreements among BRICS nations, reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to boost intra-BRICS trade.

**Investment Initiatives:** Facilitate joint ventures and investments in sectors like renewable energy, technology, and infrastructure, aligning with each member's strategic interests.

- Promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

**Collaborative Projects:** Initiate and support projects focusing on health, education, and sustainable development that resonate with the SDGs, showcasing India's commitment to global challenges.

**Knowledge Sharing:** Leverage India's experiences in areas like agriculture, digital technology, and poverty alleviation to support member nations in achieving their developmental goals.

- Enhancing Political Dialogue

**Regular High-Level Meetings:** Facilitate frequent dialogues and high-level summits among BRICS leaders to address pressing global issues such as climate change, security, and economic stability.

**Crisis Response Mechanism:** Develop a collaborative approach to address regional and global crises, reinforcing the collective strength of BRICS.

- Fostering Cultural Diplomacy

**Cultural Exchange Programs:** Promote people-to-people connections through cultural exchange programs, fostering a deeper understanding among BRICS nations.

**Academic Collaborations:** Encourage partnerships between universities and research institutions to facilitate academic exchanges and joint research initiatives.

- Strengthening Security Cooperation

**Counter-Terrorism Initiatives:** Collaborate on security issues, particularly in counter-terrorism, cyber security, and transnational crime, enhancing mutual trust and cooperation.

**Defense Partnerships:** Explore joint defense exercises and military cooperation among BRICS nations to bolster security alliances.

- Engaging with Global Institutions

**Advocacy for Reform:** Promote reforms in global institutions like the UN, IMF, and World Bank to better reflect the interests of emerging economies, positioning India as a leader in global governance discussions.

**BRICS+ Approach:** Explore the possibility of including other emerging economies or regional organizations into BRICS discussions, enhancing its global footprint.

- Harnessing Technological Collaboration

**Digital Economy Initiatives:** Leverage technology for enhancing cooperation in fields such as e-governance, digital finance, and smart cities.

**Innovation and Start-Up Ecosystem:** Foster collaboration among startups in BRICS nations, encouraging innovation and technology transfer.

- Maintaining a Neutral Stance in Conflicts

**Balanced Diplomacy:** Strive to maintain a neutral stance in conflicts among BRICS members, fostering dialogue and understanding to prevent divisions.

**Mediation Role:** Position India as a mediator in regional disputes, enhancing its diplomatic profile and influence within BRICS.

- Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

**Global Communication Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive communication strategy to promote India's values, culture, and contributions to global issues, enhancing its soft power in BRICS.

**Media Engagement:** Increase engagement with media and public platforms in BRICS nations to build a positive narrative around India's role.

By focusing on these strategic areas, India can enhance its influence within BRICS while promoting a balanced and cooperative approach to global challenges. Through active diplomacy and collaboration, India can position itself as a key player in shaping the future of BRICS and its impact on the global stage.

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## 2. Conclusion

In conclusion, India's strategic influence within BRICS highlights its role as a key player in reshaping global power dynamics. Through a careful balance of diplomacy, economic engagement, and political collaboration, India has effectively leveraged its membership to promote its national interests while fostering a sense of unity among emerging economies.

By advocating for reforms in global governance institutions, India positions itself as a leader in representing the concerns of developing nations, addressing issues such as climate change, sustainable development, and economic inequality. Furthermore, India's commitment to multilateralism reinforces its stature on the world stage, enabling it to navigate complex geopolitical challenges and counterbalance the influence of traditional powers. As BRICS evolves, India's strategic approach will be crucial in determining the bloc's ability to address shared challenges and enhance its collective influence. By continuing to foster strong diplomatic ties and advocating for a multipolar world, India is not only strengthening its own position but also contributing to a more equitable global order.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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