

India-China Rivalry and its Long Shadow Over the BRICS

Written by Arvind Mohan

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/11/02/india-china-rivalry-and-its-long-shadow-over-the-brics/>

ARVIND MOHAN, NOV 2 2024

The recently concluded BRICS summit from 22-24 October in Kazan was the first meeting of the expanded group which also marked the attendance of numerous global south countries desiring to join the bloc. While Western analysis frequently dismisses its relevance, the interests of many developing countries in joining the bloc to navigate an uncertain world indicate its longevity. But despite its appeal, there are deep internal tensions, that threaten its effectiveness. Chief among them is the sword of Damocles hanging over BRICS due to the sustained geopolitical tension between India and China, notwithstanding the military disengagement agreement announced on the eve of the summit.

As highlighted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's closing speech at the summit, where he cautioned the group being perceived as 'divisive' – the two countries have strategic differences over the bloc's purpose. India is satisfied with reforming the existing order by getting a seat at the table, however, China along with Russia, increasingly positions the BRICS in opposition to the West and the global order authored by the United States.

To achieve its ambition of dethroning the U.S. as the sole global hegemon, China led the drive to add members beyond the four original members (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and South Africa to be the leader of a sizeable bloc with considerable economic heft. India and Brazil initially fell afoul of China's desire to expand the BRICS group in 2017 worrying that the expansion would limit their influence. As China advertised an expanded BRICS as a counterweight to the G7 and projected itself as the voice of the Global South, it went on a diplomatic offensive in 2023 to legitimize the bloc's expansion as an essential step to improve the standing of the developing world. Eventually, India harboring aspirations to woo the global South could ill afford to come across as non-inclusive.

China also strongly believed that expansion would add economic vitality to the group after the growth rate had substantially dwindled in countries like South Africa and Brazil aggravated by the pandemic. The economic downturn weakened their association with the bloc and turned them away from cooperation. China realized that at a time when it started to face increasing resistance from the Western world, plodding along with a weakened BRICS limited to its original five members would not serve its national interest.

While India had to concede that the expansion diluted the original purpose and would make arriving at a consensus decision more difficult, expanding the group also brought new opportunities, especially considering its important ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia (which is yet to accept the invitation). Though India was unsuccessful in setting up membership criteria, eventually every country welcomed was among New Delhi's recommendations. The past episode hints that future rounds of expansion will generate differences between New Delhi and China over which countries to be included due to their diverging strategic outlook towards the bloc.

All original BRICS members nursed decades-old grievances against an unjust American-led global order. India and China rebuffed the postwar institutions of global governance for ignoring their economic rise and remaining out of sync with the existing power configuration. India and China banded together with other emerging countries to register their voices as the West remained deaf to the geopolitical realities of the 21st century. Their participation in BRICS was underpinned by the mutual desire to improve the material conditions of the global south, increase local currency

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settlements, and reform the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization. They also increasingly grew anxious about Washington's unilateral usage of sanctions to restrict trade and investment.

Nonetheless, there are strategic divergences between them over their approach to BRICS. Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, China was happy to keep a low profile and shied away from claiming the leadership of the grouping. However, following the rise of Xi Jinping and worries concerning America's containment policies, Beijing wished to supersede Western institutions with its architecture. India though was interested in reforming the existing order with a greater role for itself while veering away from countries in the Global South from Chinese projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China, alongside Russia, views BRICS as an arena to cooperate with other regional powers of the Global South and incrementally limit the influence of the West. Beijing is confident about partnering with other emerging economies and building new international organizations rather than jostling for hierarchical rights in the Western-led order. BRICS was also considered one way for China to wrestle back American policies against China via deepening institutional and economic linkages with the non-Western world. For instance, China wants to integrate BRICS countries into its BRI infrastructure by offering developmental assistance to the non-G7 nations more generously than the West.

India does not share anywhere close to the revisionist enthusiasm for containing the West. New Delhi is largely satisfied with an elevated status where it is acknowledged and respected as a vital node in an emerging multipolarity. India has spent its diplomatic capital reforming multilateral institutions, bolstering South-South cooperation, and working on non-controversial issues like combating terrorism, climate change, energy cooperation, and the pandemic. India's primary grievance with the West is its exclusion from the Security Council of the United Nations, and it believes that support from BRICS would be necessary for any such reform. As part of its multi-aligned foreign policy, India's membership in BRICS reminds the West of its long-cherished strategic autonomy and not to take its cooperation for granted while ensuring that the group bases its identity on a non-Western footing and not an anti-Western one.

While both India and China have misgivings about American hegemony their strategy vary. China wishes to accelerate American decline, meanwhile, India is inclined to hedge in a world in which America's relative power has declined and the future of the international order is unsettled. Seen from the perspective of New Delhi, the world is transitioning from a U.S.-led unipolarity to a more multipolar world, and BRICS despite its internal fissures and soft institutionalization is a valuable stage to be among the players choreographing this change.

On 21 October, India and China reached an agreement on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that had arisen in these areas in 2020. Will the tactical rapprochement herald a brighter future for the BRICS? Reading too much into the border detente is misguided. Indian elites believe that while they advocate for a multipolar Asia and a multipolar world, China nurtures ambitions of a unipolar Asia and a bipolar world leading to intractable structural competition. Great powers like China naturally desire and aim for regional hegemony. India is however historically and culturally hard-wired for independence; it will not countenance a subservient relationship with China where the balance of power in Asia is tilted towards the Middle Kingdom. The differences between these two large countries are long and complex and will not be settled in a hurry.

While some voices counsel India to quit the BRICS, New Delhi will continue to invest in the bloc to ensure China does not monopolize the institutional space of global south cooperation. India will borrow a leaf out of China's strategic playbook and utilize the BRICS as a necessary although insufficient institutional mechanism to limit China's hegemonic tendencies, just as China has sought to do so against the U.S. Only a full-scale war between India and China will force New Delhi's hand to abandon the bloc.

Moreover, India's suspicion of China due to the latter's military and diplomatic support to Pakistan, the challenge to its traditional leadership in South Asia, and the festering border dispute will result in India's continued engagement in international institutions, such as the BRICS mechanisms, the Russia-India-China frameworks, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as tools of its soft-balancing strategy to restrain Beijing. The lack of mutual overlaps

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on sensitive geopolitical issues between India and China will make the bloc less influential internationally. Far from achieving goals like de-dollarization championed by countries like China and Russia, BRICS will mostly be limited to a series of low-hanging fruits focused on matters like climate change and public health.

While the grouping must manage India-China tensions and contradictions in the years ahead, the contestation within BRICS won't lead to its disintegration as it serves the national interest of the two. India will utilize the collective bargaining power of the bloc to reform Western-dominated institutions without allowing them to devolve into an anti-western formation. Meanwhile, the growing strategic rivalry with the U.S. will incentivize China to prioritize BRICS. The overarching goal of Chinese foreign policy is to counterbalance the U.S., for which it will be willing to share decision-making authority with lesser powers in BRICS. The forum will allow China to compete with the U.S. without inviting excessive negative attention.

The rivalry between the two will invariably reduce the political cohesion of the group to become an influential force in global affairs. The competition inside BRICS to shape its future will likely be more intense than any collective counter against Western hegemony. The contest between anti-western states led by China and Russia and nonaligned ones championed by India and Brazil will be a prominent theme of BRICS as they all look to court the global south. While New Delhi and Beijing have a national interest to remain invested in BRICS, their mutual antipathy and suspicion will ensure that the gulf between the bloc's soaring rhetoric and concrete action will remain vast.

About the author:

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