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"India's Strategic Autonomy in BRICS (2020–2025)"

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Abstract

Strategic autonomy has been a key feature of India's foreign policy, allowing the country to pursue its national interests and maintain good relations with a range of competing global powers. The BRICS grouping, in its original configuration comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, offers an important platform for India to promote multipolarity, reform global governance and strengthen cooperation among developing countries. Between 2020 and 2025, BRICS has undergone a period of significant changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainty and institutional expansion. These developments provided new opportunities as well as challenges for India's foreign policy. This paper explores how India has leveraged BRICS to promote strategic autonomy in this period. It employs a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of official BRICS declarations, Indian foreign policy documents and relevant academic literature. The paper contends that BRICS increases India's diplomatic options through a forum for South-South cooperation and multilateral reform. Differences between India and China, divergent interests among members and limitations in institutional coordination, however, restrict the effectiveness of the grouping. The study concludes that India sees BRICS not as a substitute for its broader international partnerships but as one instrument of multi-alignment whereby it seeks to retain its decision-making autonomy and increase its leverage in a changing global order.

Key Words: India, BRICS, strategic autonomy, Indian foreign policy, multipolarity, Global South, multi-alignment

Introduction

The global political and economic order is undergoing a major shift as emerging economic increasingly challenge the dominance of the traditional western powers. This shift , popularly turned the rise of the global South , signifies a growing voice of developing nations in area such as trade, technology,

finance and climate change and global governance in this context BRICS has emerged as one of the important platforms through which these countries discuss economic cooperation, political coordination and reform of multilateral institutions. Foreign policy choices according to the state's own view of national interests without being forced to take into account the demands of a specific power or alliance. India has developed closer ties with several major powers, but has also continued its engagement with countries whose strategic priorities do not always match its own. India gets the chance to engage with Russia, China, Brazil, South Africa and, after expansion, other emerging economies at the same time with BRICS. The grouping also provides a forum to discuss international financial reform, development, climate change, technology and the concerns of the Global South. India's engagement with BRICS is therefore linked to its larger aim of having a stake in a multipolar world order.

The period 2020-2025 has special relevance for BRICS. The pandemic has proved the importance of international cooperation on public health and economic recovery. India's BRICS chairship in 2021 prioritized multilateral reform, counterterrorism, digital and technological solutions for sustainable development, and people-to-people exchanges (MEA, Government of India, 2022). The 2024 expansion of BRICS and the activities of the group in 2025 further changed its diplomatic significance.

The Problem of the Study

India's membership of BRICS is a big question of foreign policy. On the other hand, the grouping provides opportunities to promote multipolarity, represent the interests of developing countries and influence debates on global governance. In contrast, India is in a strategic rivalry with China, and the other BRICS countries have different levels of relations with the West and different positions on international conflicts.

Therefore, joining BRICS does not automatically mean greater strategic autonomy. Its real contribution rests on whether India can translate diplomatic engagement into policy outcomes without compromising its independent national interests. The major research problem is to assess the extent to which BRICS has been a practical tool of India's strategic autonomy in 2020-2025.

The study aims to:

1. To analyze the significance and relevance of strategic autonomy in India's foreign policy.
2. To study India's engagement with BRICS in 2020-2025.
3. To examine the role of BRICS in India's pursuit of multipolarity, Global South cooperation and global governance reform.
4. To discuss the major obstacles and drawbacks associated with India's utilization of BRICS as a foreign policy tool.

Research Questions

This paper deals with the following questions:

1. How does India understand and exercise strategic autonomy through BRICS?
2. What opportunities did BRICS offer to India for the period 2020-2025?
3. How did the BRICS expansion affect India's diplomatic options?
4. What are the limits of BRICS as an instrument of India's strategic autonomy?

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach and a longitudinal case study design. The analysis period is January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2025. The research is based mainly on the analysis of secondary documents. These are official statements of the BRICS, documents of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declarations of summits, and scientific publications on strategic autonomy and international relations. Thematic analysis shows enduring themes: multipolarity, multilateral institutional reform, economic partnership, Global South representation, diplomatic versatility and strategic rivalry. The developments during this period are discussed to identify opportunities and challenges. Limitations of the research. Formal statements are a reflection of consensus but do not in themselves prove effective execution. Therefore, diplomatic activities are considered as indicators of priorities and institutional cooperation, and not as definitive evidence of quantifiable results.

Conceptual Framework: Strategic Independence and Multi-Alignment

Strategic autonomy is closely tied to India's long-standing preference for making its own foreign policy choices. During the Cold War, non-alignment provided a structure for not formally siding with one of two opposing power blocs . Today in the global arena India has shifted to forging different alliances and working together on specific issues. The aim is not so much to maintain equidistance from all powers as to maintain the freedom to relate with different nations in terms of specific interests. Neo - realist theories see power, security and the structure of the international system as the determinants of states' behaviour (Waltz, 1979). In this context, India's engagement in BRICS could be seen as an effort to operate within a system of shared power among multiple major powers. Partnership with developing economies can enhance India's diplomatic options, but cannot do away with competition or security concerns. Neoliberal institutionalism focuses on the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation, reducing uncertainty, and enabling states to coordinate around shared interests (Keohane, 1984). BRICS offers regular meetings, ministerial dialogs and joint work in the areas that enable members to address the issues that can be difficult to resolve on the basis of just bilateral talks. India's contemporary strategy is explained by the idea of multi-alignment. Rather than relying on one coalition, India engages in multiple forums and makes alliances with countries that might not share geopolitical interests. Its engagement with BRICS can then mirror working with the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia and other allies. Such perspectives suggest that BRICS should be viewed not as a single coalition but in the wider context of India's foreign policy. It helps to open up more

diplomatic channels and opportunities, thus contributing to strategic independence, but this contribution is limited by national priorities and rivalry between states.

Review of the Related Literature

In the academic literature on international relations, there are competing interpretations of India's strategy of autonomy. Waltz's (1979) structural realism emphasizes the reaction of states to the distribution of power and security needs. This explains India's search for a wide range of international relationships rather than dependence on any single partner.

Keohane (1984) shows how global institutions can facilitate cooperation even if states do not care about others but only their own interests. Within the BRICS, this methodology means that institutional discourse can promote practical cooperation without requiring full agreement among all participants.

"**The BRICS and Beyond "** by Kevin Gallagher examines the rise of emerging economics and their increasing influence om the global economic governance.

India and the Global South by Rahul Ali focussed on Indias Foreign and policy orientation towards the global south emphasizing the multilateralism, economic diplomacy and South solidary.

There is growing recognition in the research on Indian foreign policy of a shift from traditional non-alignment to multi-alignment. India wants to work with all countries but it reserves the right to make its own choices. BRICS is important in this regard as it links India with the fast growing economies and gives a forum for dialog on reform of global institutions.

Official records from India back up India's stated priorities in BRICS. The MEA's report on India's 2021 presidency identified multilateral reform, counter-terrorism, digital and technological cooperation and people to people interaction as priorities (MEA, Government of India, 2022). Similarly, the 2025 Rio de Janeiro Declaration emphasized the significance of the cooperation of the Global South, of multilateralism and the strengthening of inclusive global governance (BRICS Brasil, 2025).

IN this arena the paper includes the pandemic, India's chairmanship, the expansion of BRICS and the embryonic conversation on global governance. A collective analysis of these advances sheds light on the prospects and constraints of BRICS for India's strategic autonomy.

Research GAP

The discussions about BRICS today often revolve around economic cooperation, the emergence of developing economies and the ability of the bloc to change the course of global governance. Studies of India's strategic autonomy tend to focus on its bilateral relations and the overall balance of power in geopolitics.

Nevertheless, a targeted assessment connecting these two areas over the time frame of 2020–2025 is still beneficial. One must differentiate between the diplomatic opportunities that BRICS provides and the tangible outcomes that its members can attain. The coalition's expansion has raised questions about

whether a larger membership increases India's influence or makes it more difficult to reach consensus. This paper explores the limitations of this approach by considering the role of BRICS as a tool of strategic autonomy for India and assessing its diplomatic significance within the framework of conflicting national interests.

India and BRICS: Key Developments

Its conceptual origins were articulated by Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1998, and can be traced to informal forums and dialogue groups such as RIC (Russia, India, and China) and IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa). BRIC was originally a term coined by British economist Jim O'Neill, and later championed by his employer Goldman Sachs in 2001, to designate a group of emerging markets.

The bloc's inaugural summit was held in 2009 and featured the founding countries of Brazil, Russia, India, and China they adopted the acronym BRIC and formed an informal diplomatic group where their governments could meet annually at formal summits and coordinate multilateral policies. South Africa joined the organization in September 2010, which was then renamed BRICS, and attended the third summit in 2011 as a full member. Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates attended their first summit as member states in 2024 in Russia. Indonesia officially joined in early 2025, becoming the first Southeast Asian member. Saudi Arabia was invited at the Johannesburg summit and it is considered part of the organisation, but has not publicly confirmed its membership. The term BRICS+ has been informally used to reflect new membership since 2024. The important developments are given below since 2020 to 2025.

The Global Health Emergency and International Cooperation 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the cracks in global solidarity, health systems' preparedness and economies' resilience. It intensified the argument of equal distribution of health care resources, financial development and the role of international organizations.

BRICS was a forum for India to discuss cooperation between emerging economies in a time of global uncertainty. The crisis revealed that national development and public health could not be resolved through domestic policies alone. While governments focused on their own populations, international coordination was still important.

BRICS did not erase the differences between its members, but it kept a channel for dialog. This was in keeping with a foreign policy approach that values cooperation but does not compromise independent decision-making, for India.

India's BRICS Presidency, 2021

India took over the BRICS chair in 2021 under the theme "BRICS@15: Intra-BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus". Its priorities included reform of the multilateral system, counterterrorism cooperation, digital and technological tools for achieving the Sustainable

Development Goals and people-to-people exchanges (MEA, Government of India, 2022). At the end of the summit, the New Delhi Declaration was adopted.

The chairship of India was important because it was an opportunity to set the agenda for the group and show diplomatic leadership. The focus on multilateral reform was consistent with India's long-standing demand for more representative global institutions. India's security concerns were also satisfied by counterterrorism cooperation.

The chairmanship demonstrates an important aspect of strategic autonomy, that India may utilize multilateral institutions to advance national priorities while engaging with countries with different strategic outlooks. But chairing BRICS did not give India the power to impose its preferences on other members. Progress depended on consultation and on consensus.

Geopolitical Tensions and Institutional Challenges, 2022–2023

The international environment became even more polarized after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war has put more strain on Russia-West relations and sparked stronger arguments on sanctions, energy security, sovereignty and the future of the international order.

India continued with its policy of national interests, diplomatic engagement and calls for dialog. Membership in BRICS has given it a conduit for communication with Russia and China while still building ties with Western nations and other partners.

This position shows the practical meaning of multi-alignment. India's foreign policy cannot be summed up as total alignment with any one power center. At the same time, differences on security issues and global conflicts make common ground within BRICS harder to find.

Another big step forward toward expansion was the 2023 Johannesburg summit. The group's desire to expand its influence and reach was demonstrated by the invitation of more nations. However, expansion raised questions about institutional coordination, the diversity of member interests and the ability to find common positions on sensitive geopolitical issues.

BRICS Expansion, 2024

The expansion process, announced at the 2023 summit, was implemented in 2024 with the joining of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. This development widened the group's geographic and political scope, and enhanced its engagement in energy, trade, development and regional cooperation issues.

For India, expansion meant opportunities to deepen its ties with a larger set of developing and emerging economies. It also raised the profile of BRICS as a forum for discussions on the Global South's representation in global governance. A larger group, however, does not necessarily mean more unity. Members have different economic structures, political systems, regional priorities and relations with major powers. India has to see whether collective initiatives are in its interest and whether the proposed positions protect its freedom of action. Expansion may increase India's strategic autonomy and give

it more diplomatic options but the practical utility will hinge on the quality of cooperation and ability to reach workable agreements.

BRICS in 2025: Reforming Cooperation and Governance in the South

Deepening cooperation in the Global South and promoting a more inclusive and sustainable global governance system was the focus at the 2025 BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro. In the Rio de Janeiro Declaration, a wide range of issues were discussed including multilateral cooperation, international finance, climate change, health and emerging technologies (BRICS Brasil, 2025).

These issues tie into India's own interests in reforming global institutions and increasing the voice of developing countries. These debates on global economic governance are particularly pertinent as emerging economies push for a larger role in institutions whose governance structures were framed with past balances of global economic power in mind.

The 2025 agenda also showed that BRICS was not just the original five-member configuration. Its larger membership provided a wider platform for cooperation but also made it harder to reconcile different priorities.

The central question for India is not whether BRICS can substitute for existing international institutions or partnerships. Rather, it is a question of whether BRICS can supplement India's other diplomatic initiatives and offer new platforms to influence international debates.

The Role of BRICS in Supporting India's Strategic Autonomy

Creating a Multipolar International Order

India advocates a more representative international system where global decisions are not dominated by a small group of powerful states. BRICS provides India an opportunity to take this forward through joint statements and discussions on reform of institutions.

Such cooperation can enhance India's visibility and ability to articulate the concerns of other developing countries. However, multipolarity is a goal, not an automatic consequence of BRICS membership. Meaningful reform requires consensus among members and acceptance by other influential states.

Constructing the Voice of the Global South

"With BRICS, we have a platform to discuss issues relating to development finance, climate change, technology, health and economic disparity. These concerns are important for India because its foreign policy incorporates national development goals along with wider cooperation among developing countries .

India can use the platform to build coalitions and push for reforms that increase the participation of developing countries in international decision-making. But the Global South is not a homogenous political bloc. Its members have divergent interests and India has to work through negotiation rather than presumes a common position on every issue.

Broadening the diplomatic options

One of the important contributions of BRICS is that it gives India a chance to interact with countries outside its other major diplomatic partnerships. This is especially true when international tensions compel states to select between rival power centers.

India can still have its discussions with Russia and China through BRICS, but also engage with countries like Brazil and South Africa and the recent entrants. This engagement enhances the diplomatic space and strengthens India's capacity to take issue-specific decisions.

Economic and Development Co-operation

BRICS provides mechanisms of dialog on trade, investment, development finance and financial cooperation. The New Development Bank created by the BRICS members is an important institutional expression of the group's development agenda.

Such mechanisms can complement other sources of development financing and create opportunities for infrastructure and sustainable development cooperation. The degree to which they contribute to India's self-reliance will depend on their scale, effectiveness, accessibility and compatibility with national development priorities. The mere existence of an institution does not mean that dependence on other sources of finance has been reduced.

Reforming Global Government

India has always advocated for international institutions to be more representative of the current geopolitical and economic realities. BRICS provides a platform for discussing together reforms of the UN system and international financial institutions.

Collective advocacy can increase the visibility of reform demands. But BRICS members do not always agree with each other on each institutional proposal, and declarations need to be followed up with sustained negotiations to produce concrete change.

Challenges and Limitations

India and China: Strategic Competition

The most significant internal constraint is the rivalry between India and China. Unresolved border issues, security concerns and competition for regional influence make cooperation difficult. Both are members of BRICS but that doesn't mean they don't have bilateral tensions.

India thus needs to distinguish between the areas where it can cooperate and where it has to be cautious because of national security. This limits the capacity of BRICS to act as a common strategic platform.

Divergences of Interest of Members

BRICS members have varying political priorities, economic conditions and international relationships. Some will stress the reform of global institutions, while others might prioritize reducing Western influence or building up specific strategic alliances.

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Such differences make it difficult to reach conclusions by consensus. The larger membership could expand the group's international reach, but also add to the complexity of negotiations.

Limitations of institutional effectiveness

BRICS has evolved mechanisms for summit diplomacy, ministerial consultation and development finance. But the implementation of collective decisions varies from one policy area to the other.

Statements in favor of international reform should not be confused with real institutional change. Likewise, an agreement on economic cooperation does not necessarily mean that the member countries have solved structural differences.

It must therefore be possible to disentangle the institution's agenda-setting capacity from its capacity to deliver measurable results.

International partnerships compete

India's interaction with BRICS is in tandem with its relations with the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia and others.

This is a feature of multi-alignment, but can also create diplomatic tensions where partners have opposing interests. India needs enough flexibility to work with members of BRICS without compromising other national objectives. Success will come through issue-by-issue diplomacy, not blanket alignment with any one group.

Conclusion

The main takeaway is that BRICS expands the diplomatic options of India more clearly than it guaranties the achievement of the strategic objectives of India. It enhances strategic autonomy by providing additional space for negotiation and cooperation, without replacing India's independent decision-making or its other international partnerships.

India's future effectiveness in BRICS will depend on its ability to build coalitions around specific issues, push practical development priorities and link collective declarations to measurable outcomes. Such a strategy would enable India to use BRICS as a constructive tool of multi-alignment and protect its national interests.

The research adds to the understanding of Indian foreign policy by showing that strategic autonomy is not the lack of international cooperation. It is rather the ability to become a participant of several institutions, to cooperate selectively and to have freedom to make independent decisions in a changing global order.

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