

INDIA FOUNDATION JOURNAL



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With a team of dedicated professionals based at its office in New Delhi, the Foundation works with partners and associates both in India and overseas to further its stated objectives.

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The India Foundation Journal is led by an Editorial Board of eminent scholars and leaders from various spheres of Indian public life. The bi-monthly journal covers a wide range of issues pertinent to the national interest, mainly focusing on international relations, national security, legal and constitutional issues and other issues of social, religious and political significance. The journal seeks articles from scholars with the intent of creating a significant body of knowledge with a nationalist perspective and establish a recognised forum for debates involving academicians and policymakers.

From Bretton Woods to BRICS+: The Evolving Global Order

Dhruv C Katoch*

In July 1944, 730 delegates from 44 countries gathered in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, USA, to regulate a new post-World War II monetary and financial order. At that time, due to the ongoing Second World War, much of Europe, Asia, and Africa lay in ruins, and massive reconstruction was needed. The conference discussed bringing Europe and Asia back into the international economy, with the primary objective of promoting faster growth through increased integration of the world economy. It also discussed the importance of trade liberalisation, open payment systems, and institutional oversight. This led to the establishment of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to facilitate international commercial and financial relations.

The IMF, formed on 27 December 1945, was tasked with overseeing international monetary arrangements. Guidelines and rules for trade were provided by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), concluded in Geneva in 1947¹. GATT set the rules for international trade for nearly 50 years until it was replaced by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995.

The Bretton Woods Conference paved the way for currency convertibility and a more open trading system, which stimulated economic growth, increased economic interdependence among nations, and underscored the benefits of

international cooperation on economic issues. The institutions, founded to promote faster growth through improved integration of the world economy, achieved their objective to a remarkable extent, and the fifty years (1950-2000) saw more rapid growth than the previous fifty years (1900-1950). The Economic Recovery Act, passed by the US Congress in 1948 and signed by President Truman to become law, became known as the Marshall Plan. It provided USD 13.3 billion over the next four years to aid Western Europe in rebuilding their economies. This aid was conditional on recipients' agreeing to a timetable for liberalising their trading relations. It provided markets for American goods, created reliable trading partners, and supported the development of stable democratic governments in Western Europe.²

Except for Western Europe and a few other countries, a significant part of the world did not benefit from the fruits of economic development in the same measure. This was partly because many countries were under colonial rule and only now were emerging as free nations. The European colonisation of the world, which started sometime in the sixteenth century, had colonised many regions of Africa, Asia, and the Americas by the nineteenth century. During this period, the Western colonialists imposed a Eurocentric worldview on the colonised cultures.³ When World War II ended, the colonial edifice built by the Western colonial

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powers began to crumble in the face of freedom movements across the globe. Within a few decades, all the colonised countries achieved freedom. However, the economic recovery that Western Europe experienced as a result of the initiatives taken at the Bretton Woods Conference did not spread to the former colonies because the initiatives taken for economic rejuvenation were designed for Western Europe. Hence, the recovery was primarily restricted to the Western democracies. While colonialism was a thing of the past, in terms of global economic policies, it was the US which called the shots. It was a US-led world order, which could be called a Bretton Woods world order. The economic policies formulated for the world primarily reflected the Western worldview and were designed to serve Western interests.

The G7

In 1973, the foreign ministers of four of the world's wealthiest countries—the US, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—met informally to discuss trade and financial matters. Later, this group was enlarged to include Japan and Italy to form the Group of Six (G6). The first summit meeting of the G6 was held in 1975 in France to address pressing economic concerns, which included inflation and a recession caused by the oil embargo placed by the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In 1976, Canada joined the group to form the Group of Seven (G7).⁴ From 1998 to 2014, the Group became G8 with the entry of Russia, but Moscow's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 resulted in its indefinite suspension, and the group is now G7.

While the G7 is an informal bloc, its leaders meet annually to discuss global economic governance, international security, and other issues such as climate change and AI. The EU Commission President and European Council President also attend the annual G7 Summit. In addition, high-ranking G7 and EU officials meet throughout the year. All the participants are wealthy democracies, and the forum's small and relatively homogenous membership promotes collective decision-making. The GDP of the member countries (excluding the EU) is a substantial 43 per cent of the global GDP. They have about 10 per cent of the worldwide population but hold about 50 per cent of its wealth. While lacking a legal or institutional basis, the G7 continue to wield significant international influence. However, with the rise of other economies, the share of the G7 is showing a declining trend. It has fallen to its present level from its earlier 70 per cent three decades ago and will fall further as other economies, such as India, rise. With a changing world order, the Bretton Woods system is increasingly being challenged by other groupings, such as BRICS, to reflect the changing geo-economic realities.

The Dollar Hegemony

With the Bretton Woods system and its institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, in place, global economic transactions were linked to the US dollar, which in turn was linked to the value of gold. This US commitment laid the foundation of the international monetary system. In August 1971, US President Richard Nixon ended the dollar convertibility to gold, and major currencies began to float against each other. The oil shocks

of the 1970s and the decision to delink the US dollar from gold profoundly impacted the US and the global economies. Against this backdrop, the Nixon administration cemented a deal with Saudi Arabia. The US dollar would be the medium of sale for all Saudi oil sales in return for Washington's commitment to supply military equipment to Saudi Arabia and protect its national security. Money from the sale of oil would be funnelled back into the United States in treasury bond markets. This kept the dollar stable and promoted its use in oil and commodity trading, giving rise to the term petrodollar and strengthening its position as the world's key reserve, financing and transactional currency.⁵ However, bilateral transactions are increasingly taking place using local currencies, which has caused questions to be raised about the dollar's decline.

BRICS

The acronym BRICs came to be used in economic writings to refer to Brazil, Russia, India, and China, the four countries that had formed an intergovernmental organisation which held its first summit in 2009. When South Africa joined the organisation in 2010, it became known as BRICS. In 2024, the BRICS was expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Two other countries were also invited to join: Argentina and Saudi Arabia. Argentina later declined the invitation, and Saudi Arabia has yet to accept formally. The expanded group is referred to as the 'BRICS+'. The Kazan Summit of 2024, hosted by Russia, reportedly agreed to create a new category of BRICS countries. As per media reports, Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia,

Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam were offered membership, but no further details are available.⁶

When BRICS was founded in 2009, the underlying idea was that as an informal grouping of emerging economies, it could influence the policies initiated by international institutions that were overly dominated by Western powers whose interests they served to the detriment of developing countries. They sought an alternative to what was perceived as the dominance of the Western viewpoint in major multilateral groupings, such as the World Bank, the Group of Seven (G7), and the UN Security Council. Thus, the thrust was coordinating its members' economic and diplomatic policies, creating new financial institutions, and reducing dependence on the U.S. dollar. However, this approach had inherent contradictions. The countries have diverse interests and independent foreign policies that reflect on their policies while dealing with the United States and the stand they take on issues such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas war and other conflicts. Their shared interests include increasing economic development, focusing on multilateralism, opposing non-UN sanctions, and advocating for global governance reforms.⁷ Recently, emphasis has also been laid on creating alternate global finance systems to reduce dependency on the US dollar.⁸

A significant achievement of the BRICS is the founding of the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2014. The NDB provides development funds to countries as an alternative to the World Bank and the IMF. The group's expansion in 2024 indicates growing economic and demographic heft, enabling it to exert more significant influence on global

financial systems and issues such as climate change and clean energy.

Along with the founding of the NDB, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) was also agreed upon. A treaty to that effect was signed in July 2014 and ratified by the BRICS countries at the Summit held in July 2015. The CRA protects member countries against global liquidity pressures. It is a framework for providing support through liquidity and precautionary instruments in response to actual or potential short-term balance of payments pressures.

The NDB and the CRA were designed as alternatives to the Bretton Woods arrangement because it was perceived that institutions like the World Bank and the IMF were failing to meet the needs of poorer nations. Commenting on the Bretton Woods system, UN Secretary-General António Guterres pithily remarked: “Rich countries created this system to benefit rich countries.” While the NDB provides easier access to funds than the World Bank, it is restricted to its members. Its lending focuses on clean energy, transportation, sanitation, and social development. Since its operations began in 2016, the NDB has approved over \$32 billion for ninety-six projects. While this sum is not insignificant, the World Bank lends far more. In fiscal 2023 itself, the World Bank lending was USD 72.8 billion.⁹ In terms of its sheer scale of operations, the NDB cannot replace the World Bank. Also, its ambitions to redesign the global financial system have fallen short, as it maintains many of its competitors’ practices. The NDB and CRA are meant to mimic the World Bank and IMF, respectively, so that, through alternative lending institutions, South-South cooperation could be

reinvigorated, and dependence on the World Bank and IMF could be reduced. That has not happened.

BRICS+ is also not a homogenous bloc. Significant tensions exist among the original members, India and China, and between newer members, such as Egypt-Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia-UAE (should the former accept the invite to join the bloc). This makes coordinated action on global issues, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, and reforming existing institutions, such as expanding the UN Security Council, challenging. Economic and political instability in member countries also impacts BRICS cohesiveness. China is experiencing an economic slump, while Brazil and South Africa have experienced collapsing state capacity, yearslong recessions, chronic corruption, and crumbling infrastructure in the past decade. The push to enlarge the bloc is also fraught with challenges. Russia and China favour expansion, while India and Brazil are more hesitant, considering their warm relationship with the US and fearing a dilution in their influence in the bloc. While Russia may desire BRICS to head in a more strongly anti-West direction, there will be resistance from India, UAE, Brazil and Saudi Arabia as and when it joins the bloc. As Boris Bondarev, former Russian diplomat to the United Nations, told the Washington Post in 2023: “Nobody in this bloc is willing to put themselves in the position that Russia is currently in, as an open adversary of the West and the United States, risking armed confrontation.”¹⁰

However, the BRICS will continue to expand. Many analysts believe that a growing BRICS+ could undermine the Western-led international order. Others believe that the BRICS’s ambition

to create its currency and develop a workable alternative to existing institutions faces insurmountable challenges. The jury is still out. One thing, though, is certain: The group will also face pushback from developed nations. How it navigates the headwinds it will encounter will determine its heft in the coming years.

The Dollar Question

The BRICS countries have serious concerns about the US dollar's primacy in international trade, which exposes them to Western sanctions. They advocate de-dollarization and increased trade in local currencies or a potential common BRICS currency. A BRICS currency is unlikely for the present, as it would require significant political compromises, including a banking union, a fiscal union, and general macroeconomic convergence. The dollar is still used in over 80% of global trade and is favoured as a stable currency. It would be difficult for the BRICS countries to develop an alternative that could have the world's trust.

The Biden administration has downplayed talk of de-dollarization. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that Washington doesn't see BRICS as a geopolitical rival, while Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has largely dismissed efforts to move away from the dollar. The general view in Western capitals is that the BRICS countries' ambitions are exaggerated, and internal challenges within the grouping hamper any real threat to Western economic health.¹¹

However, doubts and concerns persist, with some Western analysts stating that anti-West sentiment is increasing and that the West needs to reform financial institutions. Some scholars also

opine that the BRICS de-dollarization efforts could eventually undermine the dollar's strength and, thus, the health of the U.S. economy. The prevailing sentiment is that "Ignoring BRICS as a major policy force—something the U.S. has been prone to do in the past—is no longer an option."¹²

President-elect Donald Trump also expressed that concern on his social media, TruthSocial, on 30 November. "The idea that the BRICS Countries are trying to move away from the Dollar while we standby and watch is OVER. We require a commitment from these Countries that they will neither create a new BRICS currency nor back any other currency to replace the mighty US Dollar, or they will face 100% tariffs and should expect to say goodbye to selling into the wonderful US Economy."¹³ This threat will undoubtedly put a hold on any immediate plans to replace the US dollar, but the fact that Mr Trump was compelled to make it indicates high levels of concern in the US about the possibility of the US dollar being replaced.

Since the end of the Second World War, the US dollar has been the world's most used currency. It is the currency of choice for international trade, especially for major commodities such as oil. Higher dollar demand enables the US to borrow money at a lower cost and helps keep its huge external debt down¹⁴. While the rise of other currencies, such as the Euro, has eroded the US advantage somewhat, the dollar remains central to the global payments system. It increases the power of US financial sanctions.

But the pushback against the dollar has started. Today, India buys oil from Russia without using the dollar. So does China. However, developing a BRICS currency is far from the horizon. The dollar

is unlikely to be overtaken as the world's leading reserve currency anytime soon, but it will slowly come to share influence with other currencies. This trend will be aggressively resisted by the US. Some analysts believe that what we are witnessing today

is the first sign of the end of the American empire. That remains to be seen. However, in the final analysis, BRICS will prioritise its efforts to achieve greater financial inclusivity in the world order. The coming decade will be interesting to watch.

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Geopolitical Alignment and Internal Differences in the BRICS Bloc

Anurag Punetha*

"The BRICS economies now surpass the G7 in output, redefining global power dynamics. Nations no longer look solely to Washington or London for development deals; they weigh offers from Beijing, New Delhi, and Sao Paulo. This marks a decisive shift in global influence." - Richard D. Wolff, an economist and Professor Emeritus, made the above observation while discussing the growing influence of BRICS in global economics and its surpassing of the G7 in output. In 2009, amidst the fallout of the global financial crisis, BRIC convened its inaugural summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The timing was symbolic—Western financial dominance had faltered, and the stage was set for emerging economies to assert themselves. South Africa joined the coalition a year later, transforming BRIC into BRICS.

From the outset, BRICS aimed to counterbalance Western dominance, mirroring the creation of the G7 decades earlier. The latter emerged in 1975 as a response to economic upheavals, evolving into a forum for global macroeconomic policy. The G7 later expanded into the G8 with Russia's inclusion, though this union soured due to Moscow's authoritarian pivot. Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 marked a pivotal moment: a problem born in the West required global participation to resolve. This necessity elevated the G20—previously a coalition

of finance officials—to a leader-level summit in 2008, cementing its role as a forum encompassing 80% of global trade and GDP.

The G20 shone during the crisis, injecting liquidity, revamping financial institutions, and stabilising the global economy. At the Pittsburgh Summit in 2009, it was declared the “premier forum for international economic cooperation.” Yet, as the G20's influence ebbed and flowed, the BRICS sought to carve its niche by advocating for global governance reform, creating parallel institutions, and challenging the dollar's dominance. These efforts, while ambitious, often proved more symbolic than substantive.

In 2015, BRICS launched the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) to rival the World Bank and IMF. However, their impact has been limited. The NDB remains underfunded, with disbursements lagging far behind those of its Western counterparts.

Despite rhetoric emphasising equality, its weighted voting structure mirrors the institutions it seeks to supplant. The CRA, a mechanism for short-term liquidity support, has yet to make a significant mark. Efforts to reduce dollar dependency have also stumbled. Despite discussions on a common BRICS currency, obstacles like entrenched dollar hegemony, inadequate financial infrastructure, and China's

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currency convertibility issues persist. Instead, BRICS has focused on local currency trade and reserve diversification. Another avenue of resistance has been circumventing U.S.-dominated financial systems. BRICS nations have developed alternatives to the SWIFT payment network, yet ambitious projects like a global BRICS undersea cable network still need to materialise. While BRICS has pursued energy, health, and sustainable development initiatives, internal divisions dilute its coherence and influence.

The coalition's heterogeneity is striking. BRICS includes democracies like Brazil, India, and South Africa alongside authoritarian giants China and Russia. Diverging political systems and priorities— from India's strategic autonomy to China's assertive global stance—challenge cohesion. For instance, while all members support UN Security Council reform, disagreements over specifics highlight their underlying rivalries.

China's dominance within BRICS adds another layer of complexity. Responsible for 70% of the group's GDP, it often overshadows its partners. This dynamic played out at the 2023 Durban summit, where China's push for BRICS expansion overruled caution from Brazil, India, and South Africa, spotlighting tensions beneath the surface. When rats and cats share a kitchen, it's not love - it's probably because there's a bear at the door. History repeatedly demonstrates how geopolitical threats can transform bitter rivals into reluctant allies. Consider how Britain and France, despite centuries of warfare, united against Nazi Germany. Today, we see this dynamic between India and China in the BRICS alliance. After their long border tango in Ladakh, China's backstep isn't

just India's diplomatic victory dance; it's also China's business brain.

Similarly, Iran and Saudi Arabia, long-standing sectarian rivals, recently mended fences under Chinese mediation, primarily motivated by their shared desire to counter Western influence in the Middle East. Like the proverbial cats and rats uniting against a bear, nations often discover that survival trumps old grudges. BRICS countries are bound by shared goals but separated by distinct geopolitical realities. A closer examination of these differences reveals the complexity of aligning their foreign policy agendas. For India, BRICS represents an avenue to assert leadership in the Global South while counterbalancing China's dominance. The bloc is a platform for China to promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and project global influence. Despite these divergent agendas, both nations recognise the strategic importance of BRICS as a counterweight to Western-led institutions.

Awkward Encounters and Internal Tensions

The much-touted unity of BRICS often cracks during summit meetings, revealing underlying tensions through diplomatic faux pas and awkward encounters. During the 2016 Goa Summit, Prime Minister Modi's characterisation of Pakistan as a "mothership of terrorism" created visible discomfort for President Xi Jinping, highlighting the delicate balance between national interests and bloc solidarity. The Chinese state media's subsequent criticism of Modi's remarks as an attempt to "spoil" the BRICS atmosphere further underscored these tensions.

The 2017 Xiamen Summit provided another revealing moment when Modi and Xi met for the first time after the Doklam standoff. Their interaction was notably stiff, with photographers capturing what media described as a “forced” and “mechanical” handshake. The two leaders were observed deliberately avoiding eye contact despite standing beside each other, which visually represented their strained relationship. Brazil’s changing stance within BRICS has also produced memorable moments of discord. During the 2018 Johannesburg Summit, then-President Temer’s apparent isolation during the traditional group photo became a metaphor for Brazil’s uncertain position within the bloc.

The incident, which saw Temer awkwardly attempting to position himself while other leaders engaged in conversation, highlighted the power dynamics at play within BRICS. More recent tensions emerged during Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency, particularly at the 2019 Brasília Summit. His previous criticism of China’s “predatory” economic practices led to noticeably uncomfortable interactions with Xi Jinping, including a moment when Xi appeared to turn away from Bolsonaro’s attempted conversation during the formal handshake. The transition to virtual summits during and after the pandemic era has not diminished these moments of tension. During the 2023 Virtual Summit, an incident where Xi Jinping appeared to interrupt President Lula da Silva’s speech raised eyebrows. While officially attributed to technical issues, some analysts interpreted the moment as a subtle demonstration of China’s dominant position within BRICS.

These diplomatic incidents sometimes appear

trivial but serve as windows into the more profound challenges facing the BRICS. Traditional summit photos, carefully analysed by diplomatic observers, often reveal body language and spatial arrangements reflecting ongoing bilateral tensions and power dynamics within the group.

Diplomatic Strategies for Managing Internal Differences

While the BRICS bloc showcases remarkable potential, it faces several challenges threatening its unity and influence. Despite its economic and geopolitical clout, disparities among its members loom large. China’s GDP vastly overshadows that of other members, creating imbalances that may undermine equitable decision-making. For smaller members like South Africa, asserting their voice amidst China’s dominance can be a struggle.

Geopolitical rivalries within the group, such as the longstanding India-China tensions, add another layer of complexity. These disputes risk overshadowing the BRICS’s shared objectives, creating friction that weakens the bloc’s cohesive strategy. Moreover, the diversity in political systems—from democratic models in India and Brazil to centralised governance in China—reflects ideological divergences that occasionally clash on global platforms, particularly on human rights and governance issues.

Moreover, BRICS members differ in their engagement with Western powers. While Russia and China often stand as counterweights to the West, India, Brazil, and South Africa maintain relatively cooperative relations, leading to divergent views on international issues. If not managed carefully, these variations risk diluting the collective

impact of BRICS on the global stage. Navigating the internal divergences within BRICS requires a combination of diplomacy, pragmatism, and strategic alignment. Several strategies have enabled the bloc to maintain cohesion despite its differences. Russia's war against Ukraine has put a lot of pressure on BRICS. Putin has shown the resilience to go down despite the Biden administration's calculated manoeuvres—deploying NATO assets, orchestrating sanctions, and even allegedly sabotaging the Nord Stream pipelines. The anticipated collapse of Russia's economic and military capabilities has not materialised, leaving a profound geopolitical landscape that challenges conventional Western narratives.

The BRICS summit in Kazan became a subtle demonstration of Putin's diplomatic jujitsu. While the United States hoped to isolate Russia, Putin expanded the bloc, welcoming new members and signalling a significant shift in global power dynamics. The addition of countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE wasn't just a membership expansion but a strategic reconfiguration of global allegiances.

Most critically, India and China have emerged as Putin's geopolitical lifelines. Their strategic cooperation has provided Russia with crucial economic buffers against Western sanctions, demonstrating a pragmatic approach prioritising national interests over ideological alignments. The energy markets, particularly oil and gas trades conducted in non-dollar currencies, have allowed Russia to circumvent traditional financial pressures.

Surprisingly, the anticipated domestic and

international backlash against Putin has been muted. The expected implosion of Russian society and economy has not occurred. Instead, Putin has managed to navigate through what he acknowledged as the most challenging period of his political career, maintaining internal control and external diplomatic manoeuvrability.

The U.S. presidential election discourse, which should have been dominated by discussions of America's geopolitical overreach and the limitations of its global influence, has been conspicuously silent. Putin's strategic resilience has quietly but firmly challenged the narrative of unquestioned American dominance. While Putin has undoubtedly faced significant setbacks—particularly in the Ukraine conflict—he has demonstrated an uncanny ability to adapt, survive, and even expand Russia's global footprint. The BRICS summit was less a moment of vulnerability and more a statement of continuing relevance.

The geopolitical chessboard remains complex, and Putin has proven that reports of Russia's diplomatic and economic death have been greatly exaggerated. The world watches as traditional power structures are redefined, and Putin plays a pivotal role in this ongoing transformation. BRICS has adopted an issue-based approach, focusing on areas of common interest while sidestepping contentious issues. This strategy allows members to collaborate on shared goals such as economic development, climate change, and digital innovation, even as they disagree on geopolitical matters.

Establishing institutional mechanisms like the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement has strengthened BRICS' ability to deliver tangible outcomes. These

initiatives enhance the bloc's credibility and provide a platform for deepening cooperation. BRICS often employs strategic ambiguity to accommodate differing perspectives. For example, the bloc's statements on global conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, are carefully worded to balance the interests of all members. Leadership within BRICS plays a crucial role in managing differences. India and South Africa, in particular, have positioned themselves as mediators, leveraging their non-aligned traditions to bridge divides within the bloc.

When nations shake off the chains of poverty and dependence, sovereignty comes strutting in like a long-lost cousin at a family reunion—bold, overdue, and unapologetic. After all, a full belly doesn't just dream of food; it craves freedom, pride, and a seat at the big table. The global landscape in which BRICS operates is undergoing profound changes. The rise of new powers, the intensification of great power competition, and the growing importance of transnational challenges such as climate change and digital governance have created both opportunities and challenges for the bloc.

BRICS has sought to expand its influence by engaging with other emerging economies and forming partnerships with regional organisations. Initiatives like the BRICS Outreach and Plus formats aim to build a broader coalition for global reform. Global conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, have tested BRICS' ability to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. While these conflicts expose internal divisions, they also highlight the bloc's potential as a platform for dialogue and diplomacy. The COVID-19 pandemic and the digital revolution have underscored the

need for BRICS to adapt to new challenges. Collaborative efforts in vaccine production, digital innovation, and sustainable development demonstrate the bloc's capacity for collective action.

Balancing Act and Future Prospects

Despite these moments of discord, BRICS leaders have generally managed to maintain a facade of unity through institutional frameworks and shared economic interests. The establishment of the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement demonstrates their ability to cooperate on concrete initiatives despite personal and political differences.

However, these awkward encounters and diplomatic missteps suggest that BRICS' internal cohesion remains fragile. As the bloc continues to evolve and potentially expand, managing these personal dynamics and national differences while maintaining collective effectiveness will remain a crucial challenge for its future development. Initially envisioned as an economic bloc in 2001, BRICS emerged as a symbol of the shifting global economic centre from the West to the Global South. The addition of South Africa in 2010 expanded the group's geopolitical significance, integrating Africa into its ambit. Over time, BRICS has evolved beyond its economic roots, taking on a political role by advocating for a multipolar world order, reforming global institutions such as the United Nations and International Monetary Fund, and countering Western hegemony.

Shared experiences of marginalisation in global governance structures have driven this evolution. BRICS countries have often been excluded from key decision-making processes, prompting them

to push for greater representation and influence. However, as the bloc has sought to assert itself as a unified voice for the Global South, internal differences have frequently complicated its trajectory. In a bold display of diplomatic assertiveness, India stood firm against US pressure to cut oil imports from Iran. When Nikki Haley, then-US Ambassador to the UN, attempted to dictate India's energy policy, New Delhi's response was unequivocal. India made it crystal clear that external demands would not compromise its national interests. The strategic resilience showcased by Indian diplomats sent a powerful message: India chooses its path. With India's unwavering stance, the United States was forced to moderate its tone, recognising that emerging powers like India would not be bullied into submission. This moment epitomised India's growing confidence on the global stage.

Building on India's diplomatic assertiveness, Trump's trade war against China inadvertently catalysed a profound transformation within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The result was not a weakening but a reinforced commitment to their developmental paths, largely independent of Western prescriptions. This strategic recalibration was most evident in the CCP's dramatic crackdown on tech billionaires, symbolising the party's determination to reassert control over economic elites. By curtailing the autonomy of tech moguls like Jack Ma, the CCP sent a clear message: national interest supersedes individual corporate ambitions.

The episode underscored a critical geopolitical dynamic in the Global South: the continuous process of nation-building. Unlike established Western

democracies, emerging powers must actively cultivate national identity and loyalty. For countries in BRICS and beyond, this means constantly negotiating between diverse internal constituencies and projecting a unified national narrative. What's happening here is more significant than just economic growth—it's about rethinking how countries in the Global South interact with the world. And that's where Karl Polanyi, the economist, really gets it. He had this idea that might sound simple but is profound: *"It's not just about the money, honey."*

He meant that capitalism isn't something you can study in a vacuum, like analysing a fish, but ignoring the water it swims in. To truly understand capitalism, you need to look at the whole picture—the state, society, and all those quirky little details, like the plastic castle in the corner of the fish tank. And at its core, this became the game of "us versus them." Communities weren't just asking for a fair share of resources—they wanted *their* share and didn't want anyone else getting in on the action. It's like setting up a VIP list at a club where everyone used to dance together, but now only a select few are allowed in.

While the West has been busy forecasting the downfall of BRICS economies, these nations were quietly building shopping malls and expanding their middle class faster than anyone could have imagined. Sure, poverty didn't disappear overnight, but try telling today's BRICS teens that their grandparents would have considered a bicycle a luxury. They'd probably pause their Instagram scroll long enough to reply, *"Got it, thanks for the history lesson."* Despite some of the most palpable differences, BRICS countries are united

by a shared vision of a more equitable global order. Three core principles underpin their cooperation. First is multipolarity; the bloc champions a multipolar world where power is distributed more equitably among nations. This vision challenges the unipolar dominance of the United States and the West, advocating for a system that reflects the diversity of global perspectives. Second is Sovereignty, as the bloc emphasises the importance of national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. This principle resonates strongly with BRICS members, who have often been subjected to Western criticism or intervention in their internal matters. The third is Global Governance Reform, a cornerstone of the BRICS agenda. The bloc has called for greater representation of developing countries in bodies like the United Nations Security Council and the International Monetary Fund. Initiatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB) exemplify BRICS' commitment to creating alternatives to Western-dominated institutions. Nevertheless, BRICS has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, underscoring the importance of diplomacy and strategic alignment in navigating its complex internal landscape.

The Art of Collective Evolution

As BRICS charts its course in the evolving global landscape, the alliance stands at a critical juncture, balancing remarkable potential with complex challenges. The bloc's future hinges on its ability to transform internal diversity into collective strength, navigating a path that demands nuanced diplomacy, strategic vision, and a commitment to reimagining global cooperation.

The core imperative is to transform their differences into a collective advantage. This means managing internal tensions and actively turning them into a source of dynamism. Strengthening cohesion isn't about creating uniformity but building a resilient framework that can accommodate diverse national interests while maintaining a unified strategic vision. The expansion of membership must be carefully curated—not as a numbers game but as a strategic integration of economies and perspectives that genuinely align with the bloc's core principles.

The global governance landscape offers BRICS a unique opportunity to reshape international institutions. The alliance can challenge the existing Western-centric models by advocating for reforms that reflect the economic and political realities of the 21st century. This isn't about creating rival institutions but about making global platforms more representative and responsive to the needs of emerging economies.

The global power landscape is shifting, and the BRICS nations are the architects of this transformation. While they share a fundamental goal of reshaping the international order, each country brings its unique vision. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, India's fierce pursuit of strategic autonomy, and Brazil's regional leadership aspirations aren't just policies but statements of intent.

When India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, bluntly told a conference moderator, "Europe must get out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems," it was more than a diplomatic rebuke. It was a mic-drop moment that exposed the long-simmering frustrations of the

Global South. What had been whispered in diplomatic corridors was now boldly proclaimed on international platforms.

The internal dynamics of BRICS are beautifully complex—like a high-stakes family reunion where everyone has a different agenda but a shared underlying mission. Imagine coordinating a group selfie where each participant pulls in a slightly different direction. There are tensions, historical baggage, and competing national interests. Yet beneath the surface, there’s a profound, unifying desire to break free from outdated global paradigms.

This isn’t about creating a perfect, harmonious alternative to Western-dominated institutions. It’s about finding a new rhythm, a more inclusive global conversation. The BRICS nations are essentially saying: We’re rewriting the rules, not to antagonise, but to create a more balanced world order. The group isn’t seeking to destroy existing structures

but to expand them to make them more representative. It’s a delicate, sometimes messy process of negotiation, but one driven by a collective vision of a more equitable global system. Despite its aspirations, BRICS remains a work in progress. Its vision of a multipolar world order is compelling but hindered by internal divisions and external constraints.

For now, it serves as a reminder of the evolving contest between established and emerging powers, where ambitions often outpace achievements. As one can sum up, “The West’s thundering monologue in global affairs has inadvertently become the most effective recruitment tool for blocs like BRICS. Every dismissive Western decree, every unilateral action, adds another brick to the foundation of alternative alliances. It’s perhaps history’s greatest irony – the harder the established order tries to maintain its exclusive orchestra, the more compelling the call for a new global concert.”



BRICS 2024: Paving the Path for Economic Growth and Trade Cooperation

Mahendra Kumar Singh*

As the world navigates post-pandemic recovery, grapples with geopolitical challenges, and observes the ascent of emerging markets, the outcomes of the 16th BRICS Summit in 2024 offer valuable perspectives on how these nations intend to shape global trade and the economy. This summit, held in Kazan under the theme, “Strengthening Multilateralism for Fair Global Development and Security,” was considered a diplomatic triumph for Russia, as it allowed President Putin to showcase Russia’s global engagement despite perceptions of isolation.¹ It was the first summit-level gathering of the expanded BRICS+, featuring the participation of leaders from the newly included member countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, the UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Key leaders at the summit included Xi Jinping of China, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia, Narendra Modi of India, Masoud Pezeshkian of Iran, and Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa. Brazilian President Lula da Silva participated virtually due to travel constraints.

Guests such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and UN Secretary-General António Guterres attended the meeting. A significant outcome of Russia’s BRICS presidency was the organisation’s outreach to the Global South, with the summit declaration emphasising cooperation with emerging markets and developing nations from Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Antonio Gramsci has well said about this rise of BRICS+, “*The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born.*”²

For the U.S. and other Western nations, BRICS+ serves as a wake-up call, highlighting the risks of neglecting the legitimate aspirations of countries and communities worldwide for more significant influence, power, and agency in the structures of global governance that shape their destinies. To some in the West, BRICS+ signals a more troubling trend—a world splintering into rival blocs, driven by intensifying geopolitical tensions between East and West and deepening divides between the Global North and South. At the same

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time, it offers a coalition of emerging and middle powers a means to advance their sometimes-convergent interests and a platform to experiment or ‘bricoleur’ with the rules and frameworks of the multilateral system. These countries highlight a growing emphasis on multilateralism, trade diversification, and achieving greater financial autonomy from traditional Western-dominated systems.

The BRICS nations, with a population of around 3.3 billion, represent more than 40% of the global population. Economically, according to the International Monetary Fund, these countries account for about 37.3% of the global GDP in purchasing power parity, with China contributing 19.05% and India contributing 8.23%. The United States and the European Union each make up approximately 14.5% of the global GDP. The BRICS bloc is also gaining strength in the international commodities market, particularly in oil. With the inclusion of Iran and the UAE, as well as the potential inclusion of Saudi Arabia, BRICS could control almost half of the world’s oil production and make up around 35% of global oil consumption, as per an analysis by S&P Global.

The addition of Saudi Arabia would make BRICS a significant commodity powerhouse. Furthermore, the BRICS nations benefit from a large consumer base and labour force due to their substantial populations. In 2024, the labour force participation rate in BRICS countries is 60.6%, totalling 1.5 billion people, according to the International Labour Organization. However, there is a noticeable gender gap, with male participation at 73.9% and female participation at 47.4%. Additionally, informal work is typical in these

countries, with approximately 934.4 million people in the informal economy, most of whom are in India. A 2023 report from the International Labour Organization highlighted that improving formal employment and working conditions could boost productivity in BRICS nations. As of this year, the unemployment rate within the bloc stands at 5.3%, affecting around 84.7 million people.³

The BRICS countries, reaffirming the 2023 Johannesburg II Declaration, emphasise the importance of multilateral cooperation to address geopolitical and geo-economic fragmentation risks. They are committed to intensifying efforts in key areas such as trade, poverty reduction, sustainable development (including access to energy, water, and food), climate change adaptation, education, and health, focusing on pandemic prevention and response. BRICS stresses the full implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and advocates for the active participation of developing countries in the upcoming 2025 Financing for Development conference in Spain.⁴ The bloc calls on developed nations to honour their commitments to financing development and enhance cooperation in areas such as taxation, debt management, trade, official development assistance, technology transfer, and the reform of international financial institutions. They recognise the significant contribution of multilateral development banks and national development institutions in scaling up blended finance to support the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, BRICS appreciates the efforts of the BRICS Public-Private Partnership and Infrastructure Task Force and endorses its Technical Report on Blended Finance for Infrastructure Projects.

Strengthening Trade Relations Within BRICS

Despite accounting for over 40% of the world's population and a significant share of global GDP, intra-BRICS trade remains underutilised. The summit outlined efforts to eliminate tariffs, streamline customs procedures, and address non-tariff barriers, making cross-border business operations more efficient and cost-effective. A key focus was the diversification of trade routes, with a push to reduce reliance on Western-centric markets. BRICS nations are exploring regional trade agreements and new logistics networks to enhance trade efficiency. Additionally, the summit emphasised promoting digital trade, including e-commerce advancements, reducing barriers to digital trade, and improving e-payment systems to strengthen competitiveness in a digital global economy.

Security and economic cooperation were also central topics, addressing counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and regional stability. The BRICS bloc's increasing diversity, with new members from various regions, may complicate unified policy positions in forums like the G20. The summit discussed the bloc's growing influence in energy, OPEC+ will continue to oversee the global oil market, and the expanded energy profile of BRICS could have a long-term impact on the sector. The inclusion of the UAE and Iran strengthens BRICS' energy influence, and if Saudi Arabia joins the bloc, BRICS will control 42% of the global oil supply.⁵ The presence of major oil exporters, alongside key importers like China and India—both of which opposed Western sanctions on Russia—underscores BRICS' potential to create alternative trade mechanisms that reduce reliance on the U.S.

dollar and challenge the financial power of the Group of Seven (G7). Discussions also covered global challenges, such as supply chain issues, conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, and the need to reform international financial institutions. The focus was on pragmatic, structural changes rather than contentious geopolitical issues like Ukraine.

This summit emphasised the importance of enhancing the New Development Bank (NDB), focusing on increasing loans in local currencies. The bank aims to allocate 30% of its financing in the local currencies of its borrowing members, offering flexibility beyond the restrictive terms often associated with traditional financial institutions.⁶ This initiative is set to provide critical funding for projects across various sectors, meeting the growing demand for investment in infrastructure and development amidst global challenges. The NDB prioritises financing large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly in energy, transportation, and technology. Reflecting global sustainability goals, this summit emphasised the importance of green infrastructure, including renewable energy projects, sustainable urban planning, and climate resilient investments. These initiatives aim to address the impacts of climate change while fostering environmentally sustainable development across BRICS nations and beyond. Beyond infrastructure, the NDB has strengthened financial partnerships with local institutions in BRICS countries.⁷ By aligning projects more closely with local priorities and needs, this approach seeks to ensure that NDB-funded initiatives contribute meaningfully to long-term economic growth and directly benefit local populations.

Another key initiative at this summit was the BRICS Cross-Border Payment System, designed to facilitate trade in local currencies. This development stems partly from concerns over the risks associated with the U.S. dollar. However, the shift toward local currencies is more than just about de-dollarisation; it is also about enabling cheaper and more efficient transactions. This system represents a financial lifeline for Russia, which has been excluded from the SWIFT system.⁸ Egypt views it as a way to alleviate pressure on its foreign reserves, while South Africa, Brazil, and India prefer a measured approach, cautiously diversifying without moving away from the dollar. The BRICS summit marked a pivotal moment in the global financial landscape, with de-dollarisation emerging as a prominent theme. The bloc outlined strategies to reduce dependence on the dollar in international trade and finance, which were motivated by a desire for greater financial autonomy and dissatisfaction with overreliance on the US dollar. These efforts are driven by economic sanctions, inflationary pressures, and a growing desire among BRICS nations for greater control over their financial systems.

Trade in local currencies was also advocated at this summit. Countries like China and Russia are already engaging in trade agreements using currencies, such as the yuan and ruble, to bypass the dollar in specific sectors. Another significant development was the continued exploration of a BRICS Reserve Currency.⁹ Though still in the conceptual phase, this initiative seeks to create an international currency based on a basket of BRICS currencies, potentially backed by commodities like gold. Such a currency would provide a more stable

and diversified financial tool for nations seeking alternatives to the dollar, offering enhanced stability and credibility in global markets. The summit also highlighted efforts to expand the role of China's renminbi (yuan) in international trade, which is seen as a viable alternative to the dollar. These efforts reflect the bloc's aim to challenge the dollar's dominance and advance a more multipolar global financial system.

The BRICS members pledged to prioritise investments in renewable energy, electric vehicles, and climate adaptation technologies. Efforts will focus on creating sustainable supply chains, reducing carbon emissions, and supporting eco-friendly innovations. Initiatives include building green infrastructure like electric transport systems and smart grids and exploring a joint carbon trading platform to promote cleaner industrial practices and reduce greenhouse gas emissions across the bloc. These commitments reflect BRICS' collective aim to drive sustainable economic growth while addressing climate challenges. In addressing sustainability, BRICS reiterated its commitment to equitable energy transitions, considering national circumstances and the need for a diverse energy mix, including renewables, biofuels, and nuclear power. The bloc rejected unilateral climate measures such as carbon border adjustment mechanisms (CBAMs) and underscored the importance of international cooperation in biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation. Efforts to strengthen the BRICS Energy Research Cooperation Platform and develop carbon markets reflect a shared commitment to balanced environmental stewardship.¹⁰

BRICS nations view Special Economic Zones

(SEZs) as vital tools for economic growth, trade, and industrialisation. These zones offer regulatory benefits, fiscal incentives, and infrastructure to attract investments in high-tech industries like IT and tourism.¹¹ They foster innovation, job creation, and exports by simplifying administrative processes and reducing entry barriers. A BRICS cooperation forum facilitates sharing best practices in policy, infrastructure, and sustainable SEZ management while promoting these zones to global investors. SEZs are central to BRICS' strategy for economic diversification, international competitiveness, and sustainable industrial development.

BRICS nations are enhancing tax and customs administration cooperation to streamline processes and bolster economic integration. A significant milestone in this effort is the adoption of the BRICS Heads of Tax Authorities Governance Framework.¹² This framework institutionalises collaboration among the tax authorities of member countries, aiming to foster transparency, efficiency, and the harmonisation of tax policies. By creating a structured mechanism for dialogue and shared practices, the framework ensures better alignment on issues such as tax evasion, avoidance, and digital economy taxation, which are increasingly critical in the globalised economic environment. Additionally, BRICS has supported the mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operators (AEOs).¹³ This initiative simplifies customs procedures and enhances trade facilitation by establishing trust among customs authorities and businesses. Through AEO recognition, compliant companies benefit from reduced inspections, priority clearance, and smoother cross-border trade operations. These measures collectively aim to

lower trade costs, boost efficiency, and encourage more significant economic activity within the BRICS bloc, contributing to the group's broader economic cooperation and resilience agenda.

Financial System Reforms

BRICS countries reaffirmed their commitment to a rules-based, transparent, and inclusive multilateral trading system, with the World Trade Organization (WTO) at its core. They called for the reform of the WTO to enhance its developmental dimension and to reinstate a fully functional dispute settlement system by 2024. They rejected unilateral trade restrictive measures inconsistent with WTO rules, emphasising fair treatment for developing and least-developed countries. The leaders noted the need for a more equitable global system by calling for reforms to the United Nations Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions, ensuring that the representation of emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs) aligns with their growing economic contributions.¹⁴ They advocated for a multipolar world order and reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and international law as foundations for addressing global challenges. The BRICS nations also denounced unilateral coercive measures and called for peaceful conflict resolution based on mutual respect and adherence to the UN Charter. Reforming global financial governance also took centre stage as leaders pushed to address international debt challenges, particularly for low- and middle-income countries, through mechanisms like the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatment. Furthermore, there was strong support for improving the resilience of supply chains,

particularly in agriculture and energy, while opposing protectionist trade practices that disrupt global systems. Digital transformation and innovation emerged as focal points, with BRICS nations committing to collaborative efforts in artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and e-commerce. The bloc highlighted the importance of fair and inclusive data governance to enable equitable participation in the digital economy and foster innovation-driven growth. Initiatives under the BRICS Partnership for the New Industrial Revolution (PartNIR) and proposals such as BRICS Clear—a cross-border financial settlement infrastructure—aim to enhance trade efficiency and technological collaboration.¹⁵

The BRICS Countries reiterated their commitment to strengthen the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which acts as a mechanism for mitigating the effects of a crisis, and to complement the existing international financial and monetary system, strengthening the global financial safety net. The leaders noted that “an unbalanced recovery” from the shock and hardship of the pandemic is aggravating inequality worldwide.¹⁶ They acknowledged high global debt levels exacerbated by economic shocks, advocating for predictable and orderly implementation of the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatment. They called for fair burden-sharing mechanisms involving official creditors, private creditors, and multilateral development banks.¹⁷ The leaders stressed the need to address debt vulnerabilities in low- and middle-income countries to support economic recovery and sustainable development. The leaders also advocated for encouraging international organisations and multilateral financial

institutions to play a constructive role in building global consensus on economic policies and preventing risks of financial fragmentation and economic disruption. They favoured the idea that multilateral development banks should increase lending capacities while safeguarding long-term financial stability, preferred creditor status, and robust creditor rating.

Blended finance combines public funds, private investments, and international support to mobilise resources for large-scale projects, especially in high-risk, long-term sectors like sustainable energy, transportation, and urban development. Multilateral and national development banks play a key role in the BRICS framework by offering expertise, risk mitigation, and financial guarantees, making these initiatives more accessible to the private sector.¹⁸ This approach aligns with BRICS’ commitment to fostering economic resilience, green growth, and sustainable development while addressing economic disparities among member nations.

As digital markets expand, member countries have committed to strengthening consumer protection frameworks, ensuring secure and transparent online transactions. Building trust in digital platforms is essential to fostering a robust e-commerce ecosystem that benefits consumers and businesses. In parallel, BRICS has emphasised the critical role of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in economic development, focusing on their integration into global value chains.¹⁹ Special attention is given to innovation-driven startups and technology-oriented enterprises, poised to contribute significantly to industrial modernisation and competitiveness. The bloc supports initiatives providing MSMEs access

to digital tools, financial resources, and international markets, helping them leverage e-commerce opportunities and scale their operations effectively.

The summit also endorsed initiatives like the BRICS Grain Exchange, designed to strengthen food security by promoting trade in agricultural commodities to tackle food supply challenges.²⁰ Urgent reforms to improve cross-border financial practices to ensure greater inclusivity and fairness were also emphasised. Recognising that BRICS countries produce one-third of the world's food, they committed themselves to minimising disruptions in agricultural trade by opposing restrictive measures affecting food and fertiliser supplies and supporting smallholder farmers and low-income food-importing nations through resilient agricultural practices and trade facilitation. They called for agricultural reforms in accordance with the mandate in Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture while recognising the importance of respecting the mandates regarding a Permanent Solution on Public Stockholding (PSH) for food security and Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) for developing countries, including LDCs, in their respective negotiating contexts.²¹

Conclusion

The summit reinforced BRICS' commitment to amplifying the Global South's voice in global trade, calling for reforms in international trade and financial institutions, including the WTO, to address power imbalances favouring advanced economies. BRICS+ reflects the bloc's commitment to diversifying the global order and providing alternatives to Western-dominated institutions. The inclusion of these partner countries aims to enhance

political and economic cooperation, offering a platform for nations seeking to engage beyond U.S. and EU frameworks. BRICS' is committed to developing alternative payment systems for trade among BRICS nations.

The BRICS Summit 2024 provided India with a platform to enhance its diplomatic influence, advocating for greater cooperation in information and communication technologies, border security, and counterterrorism while also managing challenges posed by China. As a bridge between Western powers and emerging economies, India aims to balance its strategic interests within the bloc without allowing Sino-Russian dominance to strain its Western relationships. India reaffirmed its dedication to fostering a balanced multipolar world and promoting a reformed global order, emphasising the importance of resolving conflicts diplomatically. Talks with Russia focused on the Ukraine crisis, with India stressing the need for diplomatic solutions and offering support for the safe evacuation of Indian citizens. Since President Masoud Pezeshkian took office, the first high-level talks with Iran focused on promoting regional stability and boosting trade through the Chabahar Port.²³ At the same time, the India-China meeting signalled warm relations between them, with both countries agreeing to restart border patrols in Ladakh.

The BRICS bloc faces challenges, including internal disagreements and practical obstacles, which may slow down the realisation of a unified currency or cohesive economic strategy. Critics see BRICS lacking substance, describing it as a "paper tiger."²⁴ They caution that incorporating nations with diverse political, economic, and social

systems could exacerbate internal divisions, undermining the group's ability to agree on critical issues. While the declaration acknowledges the advantages of cross-border payment mechanisms that are faster, cost-effective, transparent, secure, and inclusive, it does so in broad terms. The lack of detailed commitments is notable, particularly given Brazil's and India's limited enthusiasm for efforts to "de-dollarize" the global economy.²⁵ In defiance of these challenges, the expansion signifies

a growing interest among developing countries in seeking alternatives to the current international order, highlighting a shift towards multipolarity and re-evaluating global governance structures. As it grows and expands its influence, BRICS is poised to play an even more critical role in the evolving global economy. All eyes are on BRICS, on how it would unfold its economic significance and its abilities to position itself as a powerful force in shaping the future global economy and global order.

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Expanding BRICS Membership: Challenges and Opportunities

Swadesh Roy*

Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates have joined the BRICS as new members in 2024. Before evaluating how this will benefit or challenge the forum, it is crucial to consider these countries' geographical, political, and economic positions.

Egypt: A Geopolitical Powerhouse

One must focus on its strategic location rather than its size to assess Egypt's geographical strength. Egypt serves as a global crossroads, with its control over the Suez Canal being of particular importance. In addition to its resources, tourism can also play a significant role in the country's economy if it remains politically stable. When evaluating Egypt's economic and geographical power, its strategic connectivity must undoubtedly be taken into account.

Ethiopia: The Promising but Challenged African Giant

Ethiopia, the second-largest country in Africa after Nigeria, boasts a favourable GDP growth rate. However, poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure continue to be significant challenges. Economic difficulties are not permanent and certainly not permanent for a large country with vast geographical space. Additionally, Africa's vast and often unexplored resources present Ethiopia with a significant opportunity. Therefore, Ethiopia's future should be judged by its undiscovered resources and geographical potential.

Iran: A Prosperous Nation Amidst Political Isolation

Iran's political ideology has led to its lack of favour with many global powers. However, it is undeniable that Iran is an advanced and prosperous country with a wealth of resources and robust infrastructure. Even those who have imposed sanctions on Iran cannot disregard these factors. Furthermore, the three core BRICS members—China, India, and Russia—are friendly nations to Iran, making its membership in BRICS appear both natural and necessary.

Shortly after Iran entered into BRICS, the world witnessed a shift in political dynamics, marked by Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. elections. Analysing Trump's political philosophy suggests that he may be reluctant to impose heavy sanctions on Iran, given the challenges facing the U.S. economy. Therefore, when Iran begins its work as a BRICS member, it would not be surprising to see interactions between Iran's leadership and the U.S. administration.

United Arab Emirates: A Rising Economic and Geopolitical Hub

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is poised to enhance its geographical and economic influence as it strengthens its naval and air connectivity. As it continues to develop into an economic hub and remains politically inclusive, the UAE is positioned to increase its influence in the future.

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Saudi Arabia: Emerging as a New Power

Saudi Arabia holds a strategic geographical advantage in the Arabian Peninsula, alongside significant resources. Additionally, the country is undergoing a significant social and political “open-up” that could establish it as a new force in global politics. If this process is successful, Saudi Arabia could emerge as a different kind of power in the future. While Saudi Arabia has not joined the BRICS grouping, it could do so in the future.

Expanding BRICS Membership

If we assess the geographical, political, and economic strength and potential of the new BRICS member states positively, it is clear that their inclusion offers many opportunities for the forum. However, the question arises: when do challenges emerge in relation to these opportunities? Challenges arise when opportunities are not adequately recognised, analysed, or utilised effectively.

In any organisation, the root cause of challenges is often the failure to measure progress and the inability to allow its diversity to expand appropriately. Among the founding BRICS members—China, India, and Russia—these countries are influential but have different political and social characteristics. India, in particular, is the most open in terms of its society and political system. This openness is part of India’s heritage, encapsulated in the saying, “Different people, different views.” Traditionally, Indian society encourages the free expression of ideas. Politics in any society is shaped by the character of that society. If India seeks to export its open democratic political model through BRICS to China and Russia,

this could create tension among the core members. This is because, after World War II, it became evident that no political ideology or system can be universally implemented across different countries.

The two superpowers that emerged from World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, attempted to export and implement their respective political ideologies—American democracy and Soviet socialism. However, looking back at history, it is clear that these efforts were often carried out through force. The countries that tried to implement these ideologies saw adverse outcomes, including bloodshed and the collapse of societal structures. After the fall of the socialist world, the United States, as the dominant global power, attempted to implement democracy and human rights according to its model. Ironically, today, many in the United States have voted for President Donald Trump and believe that each country should focus primarily on its economy and security, both internally and externally.

The reality that the world has come to accept over the past eight decades is one that any country or international organisation must acknowledge: the countries within any union or organisation should be limited to mutual economic interests, security concerns, and public connectivity. A country’s social norms, behaviours, or political ideals should not be imposed on others. Each country will build its political structure based on its traditions and society. If this truth is recognised, any organisation will respect its members’ social and political diversity, which is ultimately its greatest strength.

However, creating and expanding such an organisation will always present challenges. The first challenge arises when the organisation’s

members are not equally prepared politically, economically, and socially. Some members will be more advanced, while others may lag in various areas.

For example, the economic paths of the founding BRICS members—China, India, and Russia—are not the same. Therefore, the newly joined countries will have even more divergent paths. While it is expected that Iran will eventually be accepted by the Western world, this will be a gradual process. Similarly, countries like Argentina and Ethiopia, which are currently facing economic crises, will face unique challenges. The expansion of BRICS will inevitably bring new challenges to the organisation. This raises the question of whether adequate preparation has been made before this enlargement.

An important question is whether it is better to join an organisation and prepare within it or to be fully prepared before joining. Not long after the formation of the European Union, Singapore's then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew remarked that the EU member states were joining the union before adequately preparing themselves. This, he argued, would prevent them from achieving their desired results and could ultimately lead to disintegration.

Lee Kuan Yew's prediction has largely proven to be true.

The Expansion of BRICS: Challenges and Opportunities

The European Union (EU) and BRICS are distinct in several key ways. While the EU is geographically integrated and has mechanisms such as a common currency and free trade agreements, BRICS does not directly incorporate these

features. As a result, the preparation required for the EU is not the same as that needed for the expansion of BRICS. However, if BRICS is to sustain its expansion and include more countries, it will need to learn valuable lessons from the European Union, albeit indirectly.

Britain's Exit from the EU and BRICS' Approach

Britain's decision to exit the European Union was driven by three primary reasons: free movement of people, free trade, and the common currency system. In BRICS, the first two issues have not yet arisen. There are no conditions in place for free movement among BRICS member countries, nor are there any free trade agreements currently in effect. However, within BRICS, there have been discussions about establishing the BRICS Bank and creating a monetary system that, while not intended to replace the U.S. dollar, could work towards reducing the dominance of the dollar.

The BRICS Bank, in particular, has the potential to grow into a large-scale international development bank akin to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the Asian Development Bank. However, this should not be rushed. Building such an institution must be a long-term process, as rushing it could lead to significant issues for many member states, which rely heavily on established international institutions like the World Bank and IMF.

These institutions have spent decades building their frameworks, and while the BRICS Bank may not take as long, it will still require sufficient time to establish itself properly.

The Challenges of Creating an Alternative Currency System

The idea of creating an alternative to the U.S. dollar is flawed. A currency system cannot be created collectively in haste—it evolves, driven by economic necessity and pace. Looking at the progress of BRICS, it seems that some member countries are attempting to establish a currency system to challenge the dollar or to create a counterforce to the West. However, BRICS is inherently more inclusive, much like the economic alliances of ASEAN or Pacific countries.

India and China, two of BRICS' most influential powers, have strong economic ties with the U.S. and Europe. The same can be said for the new BRICS members, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others. This further emphasises the importance of taking a gradual approach to economic and currency changes within BRICS.

The Natural Process of Expansion

With the expansion of the BRICS, it is crucial that the forum does not attempt to position itself as an anti-Western bloc. A hasty shift towards

adopting an alternative currency system would be a mistake. Instead, the BRICS should allow its larger economies to gradually increase the strength of their currencies and promote mutual exchange. If this approach is followed, expanding the BRICS will become a natural and organic process, with adding new members simply being a logical step in its evolution.

The Realities of Global Alliances

One truth that must be accepted is that no economic or security alliance in the world is 100% successful. Even within the most established organisations, not all countries will always agree. Each country prioritises its interests, which can create challenges within any union or bloc. Success in any organisation or alliance requires a long-term commitment. Moreover, the expansion of BRICS presents challenges and opportunities for both new and core members. Diplomacy will be key in navigating these relationships' complexities, ensuring that benefits and challenges are considered as the organisation grows.



Strengthening BRICS Financial Institutions

Nakshatra Jagannath*

The 21st century has witnessed many events, from the emergence of new and formidable powers to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of new economies to the shift in the global order. The hallmark of this century is that it has slowly yet steadily kept in check the unilateral and self-proclaimed American ambition of global domination. For far too long, America considered its problems to be the concern of the entire world and its priorities to be for the welfare of the very Utopian world it envisioned. However, the 21st century gave rise to several international platforms of cooperation that kept this Utopian idea in check, one such international forum being BRICS+, encompassing some of the biggest powers and economies of the world today. Originally founded with four members, it has expanded geographically and economically beyond measure in a short time and is now aiming to navigate against the high tide of the dollar-centric world amidst the shifting power dynamics across the globe.

For far too long, the dollarised world, the World Bank, and the IMF virtually controlled trade,

commerce, and lending and caused a noticeable disadvantage to developing nations by depriving them of much-needed aid for their development and growth. This phenomenon gradually resulted in anguish against the status quo, naturally calling for an alternative. BRICS was founded to counter the Western-dominated financial system, which disadvantaged developing economies, and to create a forum to strengthen the voice of the rising economies on the global stage.

To fulfil this ambitious yet achievable objective, financial institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) were set up under the aegis of BRICS in 2015 to serve as a multinational bank aimed at mobilising resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs). The NDB was envisioned to provide an alternative to the IMF and the World Bank, which were virtually controlled by Western powers and often neglected developing economies or placed unreasonable conditions in exchange for aid or monetary support. The aim of this new multinational bank, backed by strong economies and emerging powers, was to

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fundamentally finance projects and innovate solutions to help build a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future by playing the role of a catalyst and bridging the gap between the availability of resources and the growing needs of the founding members and the EMDCs. The core focus areas of the NDB are:

1. Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency.

Leveraging proven and emerging transformative technologies, it aims at projects that deploy clean and renewable energy at scale and enhance the efficiency of power transmission, distribution, and storage. In line with its commitment to sustainability and climate goals, the NDB does not consider financing any new coal-fired capacity for power generation.

2. Transport Infrastructure. A sustainable, reliable transport infrastructure fosters economic growth, unlocks job opportunities, and improves lives. The NDB supports the development of inter-city and intra-city transport networks and infrastructure that promote regional connectivity and facilitate the movement of people, goods, and services. With a focus on sustainable infrastructure, special attention is paid to safety features and socially inclusive amenities during project preparation and implementation. The NDB also prioritises smart transport and logistics projects that use technology to improve efficiency and reduce GHG emissions.

3. Environmental Protection. The NDB recognises that sustainable development involves decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and pollution. It supports projects that conserve and restore key ecosystems, promotes nature-based solutions and better management of

natural resources, contributes to pollution prevention and abatement, and aims to reverse or reduce the negative environmental impact of socioeconomic activities.

4. Social Infrastructure. Social infrastructure has a value that goes beyond its economic benefits. The NDB supports the building and modernising of social infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, affordable housing, cultural heritage sites, and other long-term physical assets that facilitate social services, support human development, and improve quality of life and living standards.

5. Digital Infrastructure. With the growing dependence on digital infrastructure and the massive need to bridge the gap between demand and availability, the NDB finances projects that empower the expansion and modernisation of national and international backbone digital infrastructure. Investing in these back-end digital infrastructure projects, particularly those extending connectivity to underserved areas, aims to support the efforts of member countries to achieve universal and affordable access.

Another important financial arrangement within BRICS is the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), signed in 2014 by member states as part of the Fortaleza Declaration at the Sixth BRICS Summit in response to the growing instances of global financial crises. The CRA was formally founded in 2015 at the Seventh BRICS Summit as a competitor to the IMF and presented the geopolitical idea of increasing South-South cooperation in the world order. The BRICS CRA proposes to provide short-term liquidity support to the members through currency swaps to help

mitigate balance of payment (BOP) crises if such a situation arises.

The CRA also extends help to India and other signatory countries to forestall short-term liquidity pressures, provide mutual support, and further strengthen financial stability. It is a framework that aims to provide support through additional liquidity and other means to BRICS countries during economic crises. It also seeks to strengthen the global financial safety net and complement existing international arrangements (from the IMF) as an additional line of defence, if not wholly serve as an alternative in the future. With an initial combined contribution of \$100 billion from member states, the CRA is a critical component of BRICS+ today and, from an Indian perspective, serves as an additional safety net and, from a Global South perspective, serves as a living testimony to growing South-South cooperation.

However, the financial institutions and arrangements at BRICS have consistently lagged behind those of the Western world, implicating a lack of effort and a clear vision within the forum. Many of these issues can also be attributed to internal fissures, disagreements within the forum over the years, and a lack of strong leadership to drive the bloc to greater heights. However, many of these issues have been addressed and subdued in the recent past with stronger leaders at the helm of affairs, such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who remains bullish on the idea of BRICS+ countering undue Western domination in the sectors concerned and promoting cooperation, growth, and sustainable development within member countries and beyond, thus extending support to smaller and developing economies and broadening the base,

resulting in more significant influence for the forum on the global stage.

For far too long, the institutions mentioned above have served as mere paper tigers. Well-framed structures and policies are in place, but due to a lack of effective implementation, they have not been able to counter Western influence in the domain. However, some recent notable developments will be discussed to shed light on the current scenario and the road ahead for BRICS+ and global society.

Alternative Payments System – The Ambition, the Struggle, and the Road Ahead

Calls for an alternative and independent payment system have been echoed for over a decade and have only strengthened with time. Given the US domination over trade and its unilateral use of sanction policies against BRICS+ members like Russia and China over the years, this cause has gained pace recently. One such call for an alternate system to de-dollarise the world was echoed by the Kremlin when Vladimir Putin called the sanction on Russia's \$300 billion reserve "theft."

In its role as BRICS chair for 2024, Russia announced plans ahead of the Kazan Summit for the creation of an independent Cross-Border Payment Initiative (BCBPI) and the development of an alternative to SWIFT for use by BRICS' expanding group of member states. The new payment messaging system was slated to provide genuine alternatives to the US dollar—which remains dominant in international trade—in favour of the bloc's currencies. This would curtail the US's economic influence and limit its ability to use the

dollar “as a weapon,” in Putin’s words, against the bloc’s member states. In the Kazan Declaration, BRICS nations agreed “to discuss and study the feasibility of establishing an independent cross-border settlement and depository infrastructure, BRICS Clear, an initiative to complement the existing financial market infrastructure,” with participation in the scheme being “voluntary.”

The move towards an alternative international payments infrastructure comes amid a ratcheting up of de-dollarisation rhetoric, particularly by Russia and China. After being slapped with sanctions and locked out of SWIFT following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has turned to the renminbi, regularly settling a third of its foreign trade by the end of 2023. The road ahead seems rocky at first glance, but sustained cooperation on this front may yield results soon.

The M-Bridge Project and BIS Exit

The ambitious M-Bridge Project was being carried out with the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) to provide an alternative to the Western-backed payments system and SWIFT. However, the recent exit of BIS from the BRICS-backed M-Bridge project and its launch of an independent blockchain-driven payments system hurt cooperation between the two. Nevertheless, this is still a step in line with the aims of the bloc—to counter SWIFT and Western influence in global finance. Regardless, the M-Bridge project is sure to change the global financial landscape.

The Need for an Alternative to SWIFT

Given the frequent misuse of sanctions and tariffs on economies by the United States of

America, it may be sensible for the group to have a dollar-free, independent global payments system as an alternative to SWIFT. This would cater to the needs of BRICS+ member states and eventually transition into an alternative international system, offering better choices and preventing economic coercion. A concerted effort must be made to ensure this dream becomes reality through more robust cooperation across the BRICS+ group.

BRICS Currency

Earlier this year, the plan for a joint BRICS-led currency became a hot topic of discussion and debate within geopolitical circles. It was viewed as an attempt to de-dollarise global trade and encourage using a shared currency for exchanges between major economies. On the one hand, some considered it a tough road to navigate, while others saw it as the way forward, citing the growing power and influence of BRICS nations and the declining clout of the Western superpower.

In fact, towards the end of 2024, Vladimir Putin released a symbolic banknote in Kazan, signalling a plan to challenge the dollar and promote local currency trade. The banknote was seen as a symbol of increasing cooperation among member states and as a precursor to a potential joint currency. Additionally, the Indian Prime Minister indicated a push for financial integration among the BRICS members. However, Vladimir Putin clarified that BRICS was not aiming to create a new currency or replace the SWIFT system anytime soon. This duality in messaging caused some uproar and debate among various factions.

Geopolitics, however, is as volatile as helium and as fluid as water. Every minor change on the

global stage demands a shift in approach. With the conclusion of the U.S. presidential elections and the reemergence of Donald Trump as President-elect, it was clear that many things would change globally, especially for countries like India. This situation would undoubtedly test India's political astuteness and diplomatic wisdom.

Within weeks of the election results, Donald Trump announced that any attempt at de-dollarisation would face severe consequences. He threatened countries with 100% tariffs, with the U.S. again leveraging its economic sanctions and tariffs trump card. In a post on X, the President-elect remarked that any country supporting a currency aiming to challenge the dollar would have to "say goodbye" to America. This was a direct threat to BRICS+, the only major alliance that does not, and will never, include the U.S. Within hours of this statement, BRICS+ member states began to backtrack, clarifying that no efforts were being made to undermine the dollar.

In an interview, India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, stated that India has no interest in weakening the dollar and emphasised that there is no proposal for a BRICS currency. This response came shortly after Trump's tariff threat and was seen as a counterbalance to his comments. This effectively ends the ongoing debate about a BRICS+ joint currency, which now seems like little more than a paper tiger with little chance of becoming a reality in the near future.

Strengthening NDB

The New Development Bank (NDB) has been in the making for over a decade, with little substantial progress. It was founded to compete with the IMF and the World Bank and become an alternative lender and leader. The NDB's expansion, in terms of reach and influence, is crucial

for any true shift in global power dynamics.

Some priorities for the NDB include:

1. Becoming a generous lender to developing economies and those struggling with economic crises. This aligns with a statement made by the President of Brazil last year: "The NDB must work to save developing economies, unlike the IMF, which contributes to sinking them."
2. Expanding its reach in terms of both sectors and geographic coverage.
3. Envisioning and fostering greater cooperation among member states and ensuring they contribute generously to propel the NDB's growth.

Local Currency Trade

One key goal in recent years has been to settle trade payments in local currencies, reducing reliance on foreign currencies. Member states within BRICS are already practising this; for example, over 90% of trade between India and Russia is now conducted in local currencies. This not only eases trade by eliminating foreign intermediaries but also promotes the use of local currencies in global trade.

While some work remains to make local currency trade a standard procedure among all member states, it would significantly strengthen the group's financial position. Given the current circumstances, this seems more feasible than a joint currency.

The Indian Perspective

Since 2014, India's global positioning has strengthened in every sense. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian government has worked to forge new ties while maintaining old relationships with key partners. India has emerged as a

significant voice for the Global South while maintaining a strategic partnership with the USA. This diplomatic maturity will be crucial as India navigates relations with partners who are at odds—namely, the United States and Russia. Furthermore, India must leverage its influence to monitor China’s expansionist tactics.

As it stands, India does not support a joint BRICS+ currency or an alternative payment system to replace SWIFT. This was made clear at the Kazan summit, where it was emphasised that India has no interest in de-dollarisation but is committed to expanding the NDB and contributing to greater cooperation and consensus among BRICS+ members. However, in doing so, India will exercise caution to avoid upsetting the U.S., especially with Trump’s presidency on the horizon—a time that, if things progress favourably, could mark the peak of India-U.S. cooperation.

The Road Ahead

Overall, BRICS+ must focus on the following key aspects:

1. **Strengthening the NDB** – to become a generous global lender and aid for the voiceless.
2. **Expanding BRICS+ membership** – to create a larger and more influential forum with a significant global footprint.
3. **Enriching the CRA** – enhancing the Contingent Reserve Arrangement.
4. **Promoting intra-BRICS trade, commerce, and investment.**
5. **Creating dedicated BRICS special economic zones.**

If these goals are achieved in a timely manner, the member states may then explore the possibility of a Unified Payment System to deepen cooperation and exchange without relying on external factors.

To conclude, BRICS, especially Russia, must remember the words of the 4th U.S. President, James Madison: “He who holds the purse, holds the power.”

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Sustainable Development, Social Inequality and Climate Change

Chittranjan Dubey*

The BRICS grouping has solidified its position as a prominent and diverse international organisation in the past two decades. This powerful alliance has significantly impacted the global stage and is now recognised as one of the most influential non-Western blocs in today's multipolar world. According to major financial institutions, with the recent addition of nine new members, BRICS Plus now represents over 40% of the world's population and nearly 37.3% of global GDP (PPP).¹

Despite their considerable influence and potential, BRICS members face several pressing challenges that demand immediate attention. Sustainable development, social inequality, and climate change are critical issues. These complex problems can no longer be overlooked and must be prioritised on the BRICS agenda. Before exploring potential solutions, it is essential to understand the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), assess the progress of BRICS members in achieving these goals, examine the concept of climate justice, and identify effective strategies to address these challenges.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, following extensive multilateral consultations, the United Nations adopted a comprehensive framework of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030.² Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), these interconnected goals address various issues, including social inequality, education, poverty, clean water, economic growth, and climate action.

The ambitious UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These unprecedented global crises have significantly hindered the progress of BRICS nations, particularly given their large populations, developing economies, and, in the case of Russia, direct involvement in the conflict.

For instance, COVID-19-induced lockdowns led to widespread school closures, impacting millions of students' quality of education (SDG 4). Additionally, economic disruptions caused by the pandemic negatively affected industrialisation,

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Source: United Nations

innovation, and infrastructure development (SDG 9). As nations strive to revive their economies, there is a risk of increased reliance on fossil fuels, potentially undermining climate action efforts (SDG 13). Furthermore, the pandemic-related economic downturn limited the availability of green financing, further complicating efforts to transition to sustainable practices.

Internal Contradictions within the SDG Framework

A closer examination of the SDG framework reveals inherent contradictions that can hinder effective implementation. The all-encompassing nature of the SDGs often necessitates trade-offs between different goals. For example, industrialisation (SDG 8) may conflict with clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable cities

(SDG 11), and climate action (SDG 13). Similarly, balancing environmental goals, such as reducing carbon emissions, with social and economic objectives, like improving education and reducing poverty, can be challenging, especially for developing countries.³

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2019 report on oceans and the cryosphere highlights the urgent need for global cooperation to address climate change. It warns of rising sea levels—potentially 1.4 feet by 2100, even under low-emission scenarios. The report calls for stronger global and regional cooperation to protect the cryosphere. However, the financial implications of implementing necessary measures pose significant challenges, particularly for developing nations. Securing adequate funding from developed countries and attracting private

sector investment will be crucial to achieving the SDGs and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Interdependencies between SDGs

While the SDG framework may contain inherent contradictions, it is essential to recognise the deep interconnections between these goals. SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being has emerged as a pivotal focus for global efforts, including those of the BRICS nations. Robust public health programs not only protect individual well-being but also contribute significantly to broader sustainable development. India, for instance, exemplifies this interconnectedness by playing a crucial role in global vaccination efforts. As a leading producer of vaccines, India supplies a substantial portion of the world's vaccine needs, particularly benefiting developing countries.⁴

It is important to note that health is not an isolated issue. It is intricately linked to various other SDGs, such as SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 2: Zero Hunger, and SDG 1: No Poverty. Addressing public health challenges requires a holistic approach that considers these interdependencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which struck as the world was making significant strides towards achieving the 2030 SDG targets, has further underscored the interconnectedness of these goals. Beyond its direct impact on health, the pandemic has disrupted education systems, hindered industrial and infrastructural development, exacerbated inequality, and weakened institutions. This complex web of interconnected challenges necessitates a



Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre⁵

comprehensive and coordinated response. By addressing the SDGs holistically, nations can work towards a more sustainable and equitable future. Refer to the figure below:

The Impact of Geopolitical Tensions on SDG Achievement

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further underscored the interconnectedness of the SDGs. The war has significantly impacted SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The imposition of sanctions on Russia has led to increased reliance on fossil fuel exports, exacerbating climate change and hindering progress towards SDG 13: Climate Action. By mid-2024, more than 41% of Russian federal budget revenues came from the export of oil and gas.⁶ Moreover, the conflict has disrupted global supply chains, particularly for wheat and grain, contributing to food shortages and poverty in many parts of the world, especially in Africa. This has had a direct impact on SDG 2: Zero Hunger.

The recent strained relations between some BRICS countries and the West could lead to further polarisation, which may hinder international cooperation and impede progress towards the SDGs. Achieving the SDGs requires a stable geopolitical environment; any significant conflict or global crisis can derail these efforts. As nations prioritise economic growth and address domestic challenges, the pursuit of sustainable development may be compromised. Geopolitical stability, a commitment to multilateralism and diplomacy, and a shared vision of a sustainable future are necessary to achieve the UN SDGs.

BRICS Members Standing on Meeting SDGs

Each BRICS member takes a different approach to achieving climate-related goals. The Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) published a study on the vision and mission statements of the top 25 companies in the BRICS countries (five from each country), revealing differing levels of alignment with the UN SDGs. The study concludes that China appears more closely aligned with the UN's sustainable development agenda, as reflected in the corporate statements analysed. This suggests a stronger emphasis on environmental and social responsibility among Chinese companies. In contrast, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa recognise the importance of sustainability but may prioritise economic growth and social development in the short term. This divergence in approaches can be attributed to factors such as economic disparities, resource endowments, and national priorities.

To effectively address climate change and achieve the SDGs, BRICS nations must find common ground while respecting their unique circumstances. Collaborative efforts, knowledge sharing, and technology transfer can help bridge these gaps and promote sustainable development across the bloc.

Competing Priorities and Social Inequalities

There are tangible reasons for failing to meet all of the United Nations Social Development Goals. All BRICS members (except Russia) are developing countries trying to escape poverty. Also, there is a big gap between the economic standings

Table 1. Overall country wise adoption of UN SDGs by BRICS.

Country	Mean	Std. Deviation	Major Adoption of UNSDG
Brazil	4.2941	5.18127	Decent Work and Economic growth
Russia	3.6471	3.12132	Decent Work and Economic Growth
India	2.6875	3.62802	Industry Innovation and Infrastructure
China	5.0588	5.95263	Industry Innovation and Infrastructure
SA	2.2941	2.44348	Peace and Justice and strong Institution

Source: Authors' calculations.

Source: Overall country-wise adoption of UN SDGs by BRICS.⁷

of China, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa. The social inequalities in each of these countries are massive.

For example, China's nominal per capita GDP is \$12,600 US compared to India's meagre of \$ 2,700 US and Ethiopia's at \$ 1,350 US. If you compare with UAE (the new BRICS Plus member), the gap is manifold as its per capita GDP is around \$ 50,000 US.

Beyond doubt, all members are at different stages of social, political and economic development, and it is not fair to treat them equally when it comes to meeting UN sustainable development goals. The geography and demography vary hugely. The differences are significant between BRICS members and within each country. Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai are much more advanced than the cities in the provinces of Gansu and Heilongjiang.

Delhi and Goa are economically advanced in India compared to states like Bihar and Jharkhand.

However, the capital state does not compare with the hinterlands, where indigenous communities live. Basic infrastructure, consisting of concrete roads connecting each village, still needs to be improved in many parts of India, though the country has constructed 60% more highways since 2014 than between 1947 and 2014.⁸

These economically backward members must develop their infrastructure to lift people out of poverty, and to do this, they need to consume enough energy. Energy sources are still heavily dependent on fossil fuels (crude oil, coal, gas, etc.), which are cheaper to afford and easier to produce. Renewables are growing but will only partially replace fossil fuels for at least two to three decades.

BRICS countries face a dilemma: should they halt infrastructure development to connect villages, towns, and cities? Because the material used to build these roads and highways leads to CO2 emissions and air pollution. You must melt steel to

build highways, bridges, factories, and industrial infrastructure. To melt steel, you will end up using coal, gas, etc. China and India are the biggest producers and consumers of this product in BRICS, and at least 10% of CO2 emissions come from the steel industry.

China and India are experiencing significant industrial growth, striving for sustained economic progress to lift millions out of poverty. India is aiming to become a developed nation by 2047. The Chinese government is aiming to be fully developed and prosperous by 2049.⁹ *And why not?* After all, this should be the goal of any nation. Western Europe, the USA, and other developed nations did this decades ago, and now it's the social responsibility of developing countries and their leaders to do the same. That's why climate justice is fundamental in all UN forums when discussing sustainable development goals, where decisions are made and goals are set for the entire world. We can't ignore historical injustices around environmental damage as they bring the correct perspective and lead us towards a more sustainable world with shared responsibility.

Climate Justice can't be Ignored

Historically, from 1850 until 2015, a few wealthy and highly industrialised countries (including Russia) caused more than 92% of CO2 emissions, as per a research paper in the Lancet.¹⁰ However, underdeveloped countries, mostly Global South ones, are paying the price. The yearly floods and droughts which we see in many Global South countries are the result of centuries of exploitation of natural resources led by former colonial and imperialist powers for their industrial growth. Still,

significant oil, gas, and natural mineral exploration corporations are from the Global North, and they get most of their supplies by exploring Global South countries. Global North countries are dumping tonnes of electronic and plastic waste¹¹ into Global South countries, which leads to soil degradation, water contamination, and many diseases. This waste colonialism must be challenged.¹²

This massive environmental exploitation has led to increasing temperatures, melting ice, increasing floods, changing agriculture patterns, conflicts, wars and loss of livelihoods. Each year, climate refugees are growing in millions and entering poverty. There could be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050.¹³

Climate-related damages are badly affecting the economic growth of developing nations. Whatever progress they made in years or decades is lost within weeks or months, slowing down their work on climate mitigation programmes.

Even when climate finance is provided through world bodies, it is provided as loans, not aid. In its 2020 report, Oxfam estimated that in 2017, 40% of public climate finance was issued as market interest loans.¹⁴ BRICS members must challenge this practice.

Considering the complexities around geopolitics and the socio-economic world, the blame game won't solve the climate-related issues. There is only one planet, and we all live here. Today, floods and forest fires are not only happening in the Global South but this year, Europe and the USA saw many natural calamities leading to climate refugees and billions of dollars of damages.¹⁵ If the rich nations are severely affected by climate change, then better BRICS members, mainly developing

countries, must prepare for the coming future, which looks very challenging.

Progress on Climate Mitigation

The BRICS countries have much to tackle regarding meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Even though challenges remain, some positive developments around sustainable development goals exist.¹⁶

Brazil, for example, has set ambitious goals, like cutting greenhouse gas emissions by half by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. It also plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050 and end illegal deforestation by 2028. Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva promised in Egypt at the COP27 meeting to achieve zero deforestation in the Amazon by 2030. Amazon forests are essential for the world as they are considered the ‘lungs of the planet’ and act as a carbon sink, absorbing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.¹⁷

Russia aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. About 45% of its energy comes from low-emission sources, such as nuclear power. The country also invests in hydrogen production, which could significantly influence future energy systems.

India has been making steady progress. It has reduced its emissions intensity by 24% since 2005, showing that economic growth doesn’t have to mean more pollution. India’s future goals include getting half of its electricity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030 and cutting carbon intensity by 45%. By 2070, it plans to achieve net-zero emissions. Forest cover is also expanding, and the country now has South Asia’s largest network of Ramsar-protected wetlands. India is the only G20

nation on track to meet the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.¹⁸

China aims to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2060. It’s already working on a national carbon market and is helping other developing countries switch to greener ways of doing things. Chinese electric car vehicles have already captured 76% of the world market, which helps in the green transition. Today, China has the world’s largest renewable and hydroelectric capacity and is the second largest in nuclear power after the US.¹⁹

A report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in January also noted that China commissioned as much solar PV capacity in 2023 as the world did in 2022 and installed 66% more new wind turbines than the year before.²⁰

South Africa has established a Presidential Climate Commission and created a plan for adapting to climate challenges. The country also has systems for monitoring emissions and is developing a long-term strategy for lowering them.

The journey isn’t easy, but these examples show progress. The BRICS countries are moving forward, bit by bit, to tackle climate change and build a more sustainable future.

Future Steps Towards Climate Change Mitigation

The joint communique released in 2024 by BRICS Members clearly stated the importance of climate and environment.²¹ BRICS nations aim to alleviate poverty, climate action, mitigation, adaptation, and financing to achieve sustainable development goals. To achieve this, they should focus on some of these aspects:

Knowledge Sharing

BRICS members should share technological expertise to mitigate climate change on the following:

- China's early warning systems for natural disasters can be adapted for use in South Africa and India's drought-prone regions.
- China can lead BRICS members with its vast knowledge of renewable energies through solar and wind.
- India's water management projects, such as rainwater harvesting in rural areas, can serve as a blueprint for water-scarce regions in Ethiopia, Egypt and South Africa.
- Brazil can share its advanced biofuel technology, particularly ethanol production, with countries like South Africa to diversify energy sources and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.
- Russia's investment in hydrogen production infrastructure can be scaled across BRICS nations through joint R&D initiatives. India and China, with growing energy needs, could collaborate on hydrogen production and distribution technologies.
- BRICS members have a vast culture of indigenous communities living closer to nature, and they can learn from them.

Agriculture

China has made significant progress in the agriculture sector in the past four decades and must share its expertise with the rest. For example, China, with less cultivable land, produces double the food grains, at 415 million tons per year, compared with India's 208 million tons per year.

In agriculture, Indian yields per acre are well below the international norms. With less fertile land, China produces double the number of food grains that India produces.²² A country like India, where more than 40% of the population depends on agriculture, must learn from Chinese agriculture practices.

Brazil and South Africa, facing agricultural vulnerabilities due to climate change, can partner with India to develop climate-resilient crop varieties through shared research.

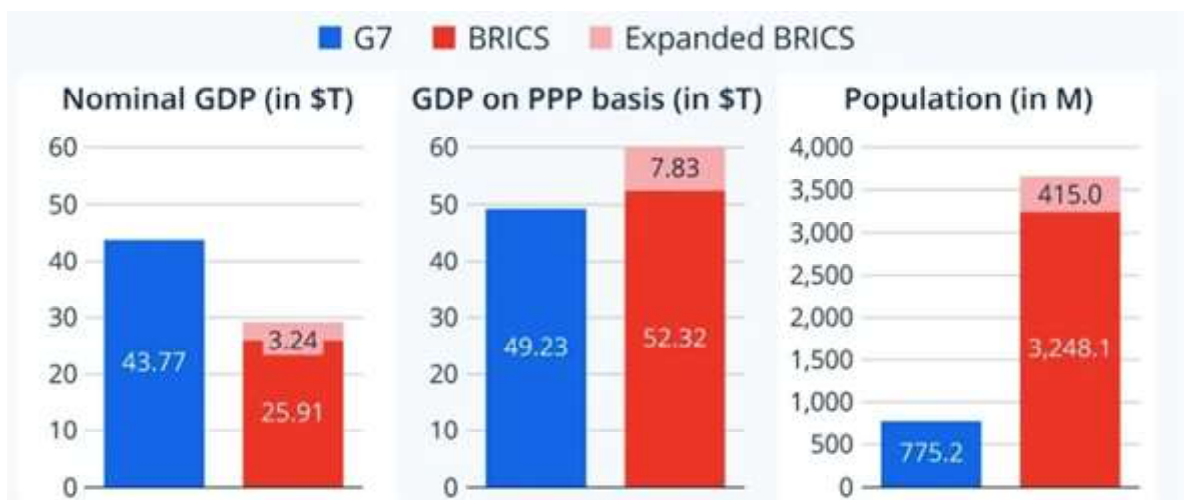
AI Solutions

The power of AI can't be overlooked. It can help us mitigate climate change and predict climate disasters faster. In Brazil, a company called Sipremo uses AI to predict where and when climate disasters will occur. This helps the government, social organisations, and citizens be prepared much in advance.

AI can help industries decarbonise by optimising manufacturing schedules, designing lighter and stronger materials, and forecasting process conditions.²³ We can also use AI technology in reforestation projects where AI-powered computers with drones define the targets and number of seeds to be dropped. This is already happening in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This technology can also be used in faster deforestation mapping through satellite images and in tracking causes of pollution and the melting of icebergs. China is the most advanced nation in AI, and it could help other BRICS members by sharing knowledge.

Financing

Achieving sustainability goals requires a proper financing mechanism. Fortunately, the BRICS have



Source: Reuters, the World Bank ²⁴

the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). Economically, this bloc is growing, and with BRICS Plus, it has become much stronger than the G7.

Considering the strong economies of BRICS, NDB and CRA should guide and finance BRICS members on some of these projects:

- Solar parks and wind farms to reduce dependency on fossil fuels.
- Conservation programs to protect vital ecosystems like the Amazon and Siberian permafrost.
- Researching renewable energy sources and transitioning to green energy.
- Financing Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) housing schemes and green loans for electric vehicles.
- Financing urban and rural planning projects considering ESG norms.
- Giving aid to affected BRICS members in times of crisis and floods.

Urban Planning

China has pioneered smart city initiatives, focusing on renewable-powered grids, energy-efficient buildings, and electric public transport systems. These models can be replicated in India and South Africa to create greener cities.

Collaboration on innovative city projects with China to develop South Africa's urban centres can help reduce emissions and improve quality of life. The Delhi government is running close to 2000 environment-friendly electric buses used by millions of commuters daily. They can help South Africa and Ethiopian cities implement these.²⁵

Diplomacy at Global Forums

Through platforms like the United Nations, UN Conference of the Parties (COP), WTO, SCO, and G20, BRICS nations can advocate for equitable climate finance and technology transfer from developed countries. Their leadership can help bridge the gap between developed and developing nations in tackling global environmental challenges. BRICS members must ensure that Global North

countries meet the promises made in the past at UN COP summits. For example, in 2009, at the COP15 summit in Copenhagen, climate finance funding of \$100 billion a year by 2020 was agreed, but it was delivered quite late and after enough diplomatic battles.²⁶

Conclusion

We live in a complex world, and considering recent geopolitical setbacks and extreme peer competition, the coming years will be difficult. BRICS members will face challenges while implementing the UN SDGs, but these are achievable through governmental reforms, critical thinking, public financing, and international diplomacy. These objectives require collective action from political and business classes, including constructive participation by NGOs, think tanks, private investors, and citizens. While each country faces distinct hurdles, their shared experiences and

resources provide a foundation for meaningful collaboration.

The growing economic and geopolitical influence of BRICS members can also be leveraged at international forums to bring reforms, which should lead to a win-win situation. BRICS has come a long way since its inception, and today, it is much stronger than ever, and dozens of nations are eager to join. World citizens are noticing each move, and their expectations are high. They are the hope for over 40% of the world's population and have the means to achieve sustainable development goals and mitigate climate crisis, provided they help each other. BRICS has become a hope for the entire Global South, and they can lead the world towards a greener planet.

There is a Sanskrit phrase, “**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**” (**The world is a family**). **BRICS** members and the rest of the world must practice this while marching towards sustainable development goals and a greener and better planet.

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BRICS Summit 2024: An Interview with Amb. D.B. Venkatesh Varma*

Joyeeta Basu*

Joyeeta Basu:

The leaders of the BRICS nations met in Kazan in October 2024 for the 16th BRICS summit. What were India's key priorities and contributions at that summit, and what goals did India achieve in the BRICS at this particular summit?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

As you know, Prime Minister Modi represented India at the 16th BRICS summit. It was held in Kazan, Russia. The host was President Putin. India has been a founding member of BRICS, and its status has evolved over time. At the last summit, it was expanded. More countries came on board: Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia (which has yet to join, but it has been admitted), Iran, and at least 13 countries have been asked to join as partner countries. So, there is great interest in BRICS.

BRICS began as a platform for discussing international economic issues. However, given the troubled state of the world, I believe that politics and security issues are now included in these primarily economic agendas. The Prime Minister's approach to representing India was extremely well-received. It focused on moderating political and

security conflicts while prioritising the economic agenda, which is the original mandate of BRICS. At the same time, this should be advanced in a people-centred way and, secondly, to amplify the voice of the Global South.

As you know, when we hosted the G-20 Summit last year, the Prime Minister organised three virtual summits of the Global South, which is referred to as the voice of the Global South. To ascertain the views and sentiments in the Global South on issues that concern them, India has advanced these topics into BRICS. Of course, the economic agenda also involves stabilising both the international economic and trade systems, as well as the financial systems, which are under considerable stress due to the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. There is a trend towards de-dollarisation, along with the New Development Bank that was established some time ago. Now, we aim to further this initiative. The Prime Minister emphasised that BRICS should address Global South issues.

The New Development Bank should also address those requirements. A proposal has been made to involve the New Development Bank in

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**Joyeeta Basu: Joyeeta Basu is the Editor, The Sunday Guardian.*

the Gift City in Gujarat, which is developing significantly. The Prime Minister also presented India's priorities for the BRICS Startup Initiative, aimed at bringing together young entrepreneurs, particularly in the technology sector, to contribute to the BRICS agenda. Additionally, I believe India consistently puts forward our proposals for the common global good. We have demonstrated this to the G-20 and brought it up in the United Nations. This includes the International Solar Alliance and initiatives to protect critical infrastructure, alongside the Prime Minister's initiative for a lifestyle focused on tackling climate change and environmental issues.

There have been several initiatives put forward. I believe that India has a leadership role. India also plays a part in balancing extremes within BRICS. Different dimensions emerge from various perspectives. I feel that India's role has been appreciated, and this will be advanced at the next summit, which will take place in Brasilia, Brazil, next year. Overall, I consider India's and the Prime Minister's participation in the BRICS summit to be a success.

Joyeeta Basu:

Yes, but no summit is without its challenges. What challenges has India faced, and what opportunities exist for India regarding its strategic interests? How can India navigate the obstacles that have arisen and ensure that both its interests and those of BRICS are served?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

Absolutely. I think you know it's no secret that we live in a troubled world. There is a shift towards multipolarity, though it is rather uneven in some respects. The world remains unipolar since the

dollar still dominates the international system. However, in terms of manufacturing, China has emerged as a significant manufacturing power. Additionally, there is a rise of subaltern quests for multipolarity from regional figures in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Therefore, this shift towards multipolarity should be advanced by India in a negotiated manner that benefits humanity. India certainly views BRICS as a platform for promoting stable and organised multipolarity.

Sometimes, this is interpreted as anti-Western. Of course, there are differing views within BRICS, just as there is a quest for multipolarity in the broader world. We are also seeking multipolarity in Asia. In fact, there are multipolar tendencies within BRICS. While, for instance, China or Russia may have a very strong anti-Western agenda, this is not necessarily shared by other BRICS members. Moreover, BRICS includes a significant number of countries that are influential in energy issues. India and China are major consumers of energy resources, while Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and others are substantial producers. I believe this also serves as a platform for dialogue between energy producers and consumers. Furthermore, we aim to advance the reform of international institutions, whether it be the United Nations Security Council, the IMF, the World Bank, or multilateral lending institutions. Our goal is to move forward in a manner that benefits not only BRICS countries but also the larger international community.

If one examines India's approach, the same issues we promote in the G-20, and those we advocate for the sustainable development goals of

the United Nations, are also priorities in BRICS. India is neither anti-West nor pro-West; rather, it is pro-India. Additionally, India is gaining recognition for raising issues significant to the Global South. Claiming that BRICS is dominated by China is an exaggeration; there are diverse perspectives within BRICS and even among external countries that value India's active participation. This involvement not only helps to counterbalance the West but also China. Overall, I believe BRICS serves as an evolving mechanism—a platform for multipolarity and for reforming international institutions. On each of these agenda items, India's role is not only recognised but also highly valued welcomed.

Joyeeta Basu:

In this context, may I ask a quick question about the BRICS currency? You mentioned China and Russia, and we know they have been advocating for a BRICS currency. What is India's stance on it, and what future do you foresee if a BRICS currency is established?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

You see, the BRICS currency has been discussed; it's more in the realm of speculation rather than specific proposals. What BRICS is definitely examining is the increase in the use of national currencies in bilateral and multilateral trading arrangements. The use of national currencies has been driven by the securitisation of global interdependence due to issues like sanctions. Each country within BRICS has drawn its lessons. There is a common interest in reforming the international financial system to enhance its resilience and develop more robust supply chains. However, in my view, which is widely shared among experts analysing BRICS, the concept of a

BRICS currency is a bridge too far; it will not materialise in the near future. The market conditions for a BRICS currency simply do not exist. Nonetheless, what is possible and what BRICS hopes to achieve is the creation of a basket of currencies that could serve as a reference point for international financial transactions. This is not intended to replace the dollar; it is, I think, a supplement to the dollar.

Joyeeta Basu:

Ambassador, you have served as India's envoy to Russia. Considering BRICS within the context of the India-Russia relationship, along with the strong interpersonal bond between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin, how is this fostering progress within BRICS? Additionally, there are many adverse perspectives from the West; how is India managing this? Could you also provide some insights into the future of the India-Russia relationship?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

That's an excellent question. As you are aware, before the Prime Minister went to the Kazan Summit in BRICS, he had a bilateral summit with President Putin earlier in the summer in Moscow. President Putin and Prime Minister Modi have met more than 30 times. They are amongst the seniormost world leaders today in terms of how much public political office experience they have. They have been leaders of their countries for a considerable period, and they personally enjoy an extremely good rapport. In these troubled times, the personal relations between world leaders are vitally important, especially with the generational change happening in the West, as many leaders like Chancellor Merkel, who led for a very long

time, have moved on. We are getting a new crop of leadership with the election of President Trump in the US.

The personal relationship between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin, of course, serves as an anchor for the India-Russia relationship. The India-Russia relationship is one of strategic partnership, which has flourished for over 70 years. However, it has been periodically renewed, and I believe that the Prime Minister's visit in July significantly contributed to this renewal, particularly by introducing new drivers, especially regarding energy security. India and Russia view each other as partners in energy security—one being a major supplier and the other a major consumer. In fact, the past three years have demonstrated that India and Russia can engage and collaborate in a manner that is not only mutually beneficial but also helps stabilise global energy prices and markets. This, I believe, has made a substantial contribution to stabilising the international economic system. We intend to build on this progress.

There are also ways to expand bilateral trade, address connectivity issues, and improve the North-South Corridor and the Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor. India has been a longstanding partner in the field of defence, and we are eager to renew that relationship. It is well known internationally that the India-Russia relationship is vital for India. This is not merely a legacy relationship; it is one that looks towards the future, which has been acknowledged to some extent by the United States. We maintain excellent relations with the US, having established a strategic partnership. The US recognises that there is a certain irreducible

minimum in the India-Russia relationship that India will not forsake, and that is undeniably our intention. One of the significant successes of our diplomacy over the past few years has been our ability to navigate the troubled waters of the international system, characterised by substantial conflict between the major powers, particularly between the United States and Russia over Ukraine, and the evident conflict between the US and China. We have advanced our relations without allowing our ties with other countries to influence this dynamic.

The reason for our success also lies in the increased stature and capabilities of India within the international system. India holds significance in various ways for different countries. This totality means that all nations expect India to play an active role. There is no exclusivity in our major power relations, and we intend to advance both our relationship with Russia and our partnership with the United States moving forward. As you are aware, during the Kazan Summit, an important meeting took place between President Xi Jinping of China and our Prime Minister Modi, which has paved the way for renewed engagement between India and China. Our National Security Advisor, Mr. Doval, was recently in Beijing, and I believe very important and positive steps have been taken. While these may be limited in scope, their impact is significant in alleviating some of the tensions that have developed in India-China relations.

However, the India-China relationship has many dimensions. It is not just the border issue we face—an important challenge—but also the broader economic ties. China's growth and its assertiveness in our neighbourhood, the South

China Sea, and across the larger Eurasian continent are significant. It is clear that India will stand its ground; we do not take pressure lightly. Moving forward, I believe that if there is dialogue, discussion, and mutual accommodation of interests, this is something we would certainly advocate for. We can also expect a degree of stability in our relationship with China. With some stability between us and China, we enjoy an excellent relationship with the United States and a long-standing rapport with Russia. This bolsters India's credibility and stature in the international arena, demonstrating that, even amidst great global turbulence, India can maintain a certain level of relationship across various fronts and sustain significant momentum in others.

Joyeeta Basu:

Yes. This raises a perhaps detailed question specifically about China. When we consider India and China, we know that there are border issues and other challenges as well. Would you say that this summit and the meeting you mentioned have injected a modicum of trust into the relationship? Can we trust the Chinese? In which direction are India-China relations headed?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

Well, you know, trust is always a byproduct. It is never the driver of any relationship, especially not with China. I think the Prime Minister's meeting with President Xi was useful in the sense that the Chinese have clearly understood that while India will firmly protect its interests, it is also open to dialogue to resolve outstanding issues through discussions and diplomacy, as has always been the case. This trend was disrupted not by India but by China, where a unilateral assertion of rights through

the use of force was met with firm resistance from our side. That is not the path we wish to pursue, but if the Chinese have come to realise that they wish to see India as a partner and aim for a gradual normalisation of our relationship, the border problem remains critical. India and China can achieve a lot in Asia as long as there is mutual accommodation of interests, both in Asia, in the Indo-Pacific, and in global affairs. Having said that, we also need to consider that there is a significant power differential between India and China

Our economic growth will support us as we move forward. India is among the fastest-growing economies of the major economies in the world. I believe we need to invest more in defence. Additionally, we must strengthen our international partnerships, including with Russia and the United States, as well as with QUAD. Our connectivity projects, such as IMEC to the west, the Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor to the east, and the International North-South Corridor through Iran into Eurasia, are vital. All these initiatives align with India's emergence as a major economic and technological power. The economic fundamentals of India are sound. We must accelerate our growth. We possess all the necessary factors; however, I believe that in the next ten years, if we achieve a growth rate of 7 to 9%, we can expect a long-term stabilisation of the India-China relationship. I am fairly confident that this positive shift, though limited and of tactical significance, can be leveraged into strategic advantages for India over the next decade.

Joyeeta Basu:

This brings us to the final question: The biggest world power currently is the United States. Donald

Trump is stepping in for his second term, and Mr. Modi is here as well. How do you think India-US relations will evolve in Mr. Trump's second term and Mr. Modi's third term? What challenges and opportunities do you foresee, given that we hear many sound bytes from Mr. Trump? How do you envisage the relationship developing, and will there be any differences compared to the relationship India has had during Mr. Biden's term?

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

There are two points to consider. President Trump is returning to office for a second term with a very specific domestic agenda. He and his supporters have been clear about this, and there is every expectation that he will pursue this agenda, which is focused on an America First approach. He seeks to revive the American economy, strengthen national defense, reduce bureaucracy within the United States, limit illegal immigration, and enhance America's role in the world by decreasing its involvement in various wars. His foremost priority, as he has stated, is to achieve a swift return to peace in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which I believe is a very positive goal for us. If this can be accomplished sooner rather than later, it would be something we would certainly welcome. It would restore peace to Europe, help reintegrate Russia into the international system, and lessen the strain that the Russia-US conflict has placed on our relationships with both Russia and the United States. Overall, that's a positive development.

President Trump holds very strong views on tariffs as a method for addressing international trade issues. We are fortunate in a sense to have a robust foundation for the India-US relationship,

which exists in Congress. There's bipartisan support from both political parties, and a significant advantage we possess is that President Trump has formed an extremely positive impression of India during his first term. Of course, we cannot expect the second term to be merely an automatic continuation of the first. However, his relationship with Prime Minister Modi and his awareness of various issues concerning India provide us an advantage that many other countries, in a sense, do not share. That said, President Trump assumes power at a time of considerable domestic change within the United States, and we must observe how this unfolds. It also occurs against a backdrop of significant international turbulence. Thus, while we have every reason to be confident, we should not take this for granted. Although the relationship is built on very solid foundations, it requires nurturing and progression through productive engagement.

The United States is absolutely critical for us in two respects. I would say, in terms of technology, the United States is truly a global power—a superpower. I mean, all these advancements in AI, semiconductors, biotechnology, and space technology. And if there is one criterion for India that is absolutely essential for our growth, it is technology. Thus, a partnership with the United States, indeed a technology alliance, is something that India desperately needs, and we should do everything in our power to promote it. The second area is energy. The United States is not a direct or major supplier of energy for India. However, it is now one of the biggest and most powerful factors driving the global energy markets, as it is itself a significant energy producer and exporter. Moving

forward, I think we would like to collaborate with the United States to explore how this entire energy structure evolves—not just in fossil fuels, but also regarding climate change, green technology, and green finance.

The third point I would highlight is defence, particularly as warfare is evolving so much; we can greatly benefit from our partnership with the United States. Lastly, of course, is the strong community-to-community relationship we have built, which stands as one of the significant pillars of our connection between India and the United States. We have observed their contributions in the past, and moving forward, these contributions will only increase. Thus, I remain quite optimistic about the India-US relationship, and I believe President Trump has some quite imaginative ideas, particularly with regard to addressing the Russia-

Ukraine conflict. The United States is undoubtedly an overextended superpower. It is in our interest that the United States becomes a more focused global power, which is precisely what President Trump intends to achieve. Many of his administration appointments align with the points I have just mentioned. Therefore, I am genuinely positive and optimistic about the relationship between India and the United States.

Joyeeta Basu:

Overall, you remain optimistic about BRICS, which is, of course, on the right path, as you mentioned. It's good to hear from you that India's relationships with Russia, China, and the US are on the right track. Thank you, Ambassador, on behalf of the India Foundation.

D.B. Venkatesh Varma:

Thank you so much.



Making a Case for Conservative Public Sphere in India

Swadesh Singh*

Introduction

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas extensively theorised the concept of the public sphere.¹ According to Habermas, the public sphere is a space where individuals come together to discuss and debate matters of common interest, free from external pressures and influences. It is a realm of social life where public opinion is formed, and it plays a crucial role in democratic societies by allowing citizens to participate in the decision-making process. The public sphere is characterised by open communication and rational debate, ideally leading to consensus on important societal issues.

Undoubtedly, many public spheres can co-exist; we can call them split public spheres. In India, there are separate public spheres where women, Dalits or LGBTQ+ can interact freely and promote their ideas unapologetically. The strongest public sphere, which has a rich intellectual history in independent India and which received support from the government of the day and abroad, is the liberal public sphere. The liberal public sphere has dominated the intellectual discourse and made its presence felt everywhere, including academia, media, NGO, arts and literature. The liberals are connected well in India, and their umbilical cord is attached at the international level, where they draw inspiration and support from time to time. Other views and spheres require validation from liberals as they control public discourse. Those who do not ally with the liberal public sphere are summarily

cancelled. In recent years, it has been observed that the liberal public sphere is dominated by Communists, Islamists and the Wokes, who have deviated from the core principles of liberalism. There is a need for a counter-public sphere to make space for other ideas to flourish.

Conservatism Public Sphere

Conservatism, as an ideology, developed in Europe and the US in the last 200 years. It believes in the ideas and institutions of nationalism, family, faith and tradition. In party systems of democracies like the US and the United Kingdom, one pole is represented by Conservative parties. In India, conservatism has seen many ups and downs, both pre-independence and after. It became a marginalised idea during the era of the Nehruvian Consensus of socialism, secularism and non-alignment. It started gaining ground with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the other pole of Indian politics. After 1990, we saw a shift in Indian politics, with the BJP emerging as an important player. Later, it also formed governments - first under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's leadership and then under Narendra Modi. Along with liberal voices, now conservative streams have also started gaining ground – beginning in politics and slowly moving to other sectors.

Today, the ideological contest between liberalism and conservatism is shaping the future of India's democracy. As liberalism continues to

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influence the mainstream discourse, there is a growing recognition of the need for a more balanced approach that allows conservative ideas to coexist and contribute to the national dialogue. This recognition underscores the importance of creating a conservative public sphere in India, where diverse perspectives can be debated and where the values of tradition, culture, and continuity can be preserved and respected.

The Conservative public sphere in India encompasses the arenas of discourse and practice where conservative values and ideas are articulated, debated, and promoted. This sphere reflects a distinctive vision of Indian society, shaped by a commitment to traditional values, cultural heritage, and national identity. It manifests across various domains, including politics, media, education, and social institutions, and plays a crucial role in shaping the country's ideological landscape.

The Imperative

While liberalism remains dominant in contemporary discourse, the increasing visibility of conservative thought reflects a broader need for ideological pluralism. For India to thrive as a diverse and vibrant democracy, both liberal and conservative voices must be given space in the public sphere, ensuring a more inclusive and balanced national conversation. Due to the influence of the current government, a conducive environment is being created, which emboldens conservative ideas in India. However, despite this political support, the conservative narrative remains somewhat underdeveloped. This stems from the significant gap between the flourishing of conservative thought during the independence

struggle and its recent revival. Unlike liberal ideas, which have enjoyed a continuous evolution, conservative traditions in India have faced interruptions and have not been as deeply ingrained in the nation's political and intellectual framework.

Today, social media influencers, media outlets and some authors and columnists are aligned with conservative principles, primarily due to the presence of the BJP government. However, the real challenge lies in determining how deeply rooted these conservative ideas and thinkers are within society. The conservative tradition has not yet experienced the natural, grassroots growth that would make it resilient in changing political landscapes. If the current government were to lose power, there is a real risk that this nascent conservative ecosystem could weaken or dissipate.

The central argument here is that for conservative ideas to thrive genuinely, they must do so independently of government power. Conservatism must evolve into a robust intellectual tradition with a strong public sphere that stands independently, regardless of which political party is in power. Just as the liberal public sphere continues to influence society independently, so should a conservative public sphere. This conservative sphere should be solid enough that conservative scholars, researchers, and intellectuals are embedded in various sectors, from academia to media to arts, ensuring these ideas have a permanent and influential place in public discourse.

For example, the liberal public sphere in India has thrived in universities, think tanks, and cultural institutions, often independent of the political environment. Whether or not the government is

sympathetic to liberal ideologies, these institutions continue to nurture and promote liberal thought. Similarly, the conservative public sphere must be developed to a point where it becomes a permanent peg that balances the Indian society, capable of sustaining and promoting conservative ideas even without political backing. The dominance of left-liberal discourse in academia and media has often marginalised conservative perspectives and distorted the understanding of Indian history and culture. This critique of the current intellectual environment highlights the challenges conservative viewpoints face in gaining recognition and influence. Addressing this imbalance is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and diverse intellectual landscape.²

A thriving democracy depends on the coexistence and competition of diverse ideas. Since India's independence, socialist, secular and left-liberal values have dominated the political discourse. However, for a truly balanced democratic discourse, there must be an alternative sphere where other ideas can also flourish. In a modern democracy, the presence and interaction of liberal and conservative spheres are essential, and each must be given space to develop and contribute. While a government sympathetic to conservative ideals can help accelerate the creation of this sphere, the conservative public sphere must grow strong enough to stand independently, ensuring that conservative ideas continue contributing to India's intellectual and cultural landscape regardless of political shifts. With the current environment being conducive, building and solidifying this conservative public sphere should be urgently pursued, ensuring it becomes a

lasting and influential force in India's democratic dialogue process.

Nurture Indian Conservatism

While conservative values may resonate with many, the lack of coherent and thoughtful defence often leaves these principles vulnerable to misinterpretation or dismissal. John Kekes observes, "There is no shortage of conservatives, but there is a shortage of systematic, articulate and reasonable attempts to defend conservatism."³ This insight underscores the pressing need for a well-defined conservative public sphere. A robust conservative public sphere is essential for articulating and defending conservatism's intellectual and cultural foundations and countering the negative trends spreading in the name of liberalism. A multifaceted approach that integrates ideological, cultural, and political strategies is essential to cultivating a thriving conservative public sphere in India. This endeavour begins with strengthening the ideological foundations of Indian conservatism. By articulating a clear and coherent vision that addresses contemporary issues while remaining rooted in traditional values, conservatism can establish a robust and relatable identity. This ideological clarity is crucial for engaging effectively with other political and social ideologies, ensuring that conservative principles resonate with a diverse audience and address current challenges.

Educational outreach is another cornerstone in nurturing a vibrant conservative public sphere. Integrating conservative perspectives into educational curricula and promoting initiatives emphasising traditional values and cultural heritage can shape the next generation's understanding of

conservatism. Support for research, academic seminars, and the development of educational materials reflecting conservative thought can enrich public discourse.

Collaborations with academic institutions to offer programs and courses on Indian conservative principles can foster informed and engaged individuals who contribute meaningfully to the conservative conversation.

Intellectual and cultural engagement further enriches the conservative public sphere. Encouraging scholarly research and debate on conservative theories and values can deepen public understanding and support for conservative principles. Think tanks, academic journals, and intellectual forums provide platforms for conservative scholars to share insights and influence broader discussions on policy and governance. Concurrently, promoting cultural activities that celebrate traditional values and heritage—such as festivals, exhibitions, and literature—can reinforce the cultural dimension of conservatism and engage the public on a profound level. Building community support is vital for sustaining a conservative public sphere. Engaging with local communities and addressing their specific concerns through grassroots initiatives can translate conservative values into tangible benefits. Community-driven social programs and advocacy can demonstrate the practical impact of conservative principles, fostering broader acceptance and support. By addressing local issues and promoting community welfare, the conservative public sphere can gain credibility and resonance among the populace.

In the political realm, conservative parties and

leaders must navigate the complexities of coalition politics and governance. Forming alliances with like-minded groups and focusing on key policy areas that align with conservative values can enhance political influence. Effective policy advocacy and pragmatic solutions to contemporary issues help advance conservative agendas within the political system. Balancing ideological purity with practical governance is essential for maintaining a credible and influential conservative presence. Finally, adaptability and inclusivity are crucial for the conservative public sphere. Engaging with diverse perspectives and addressing societal changes ensures that conservatism remains relevant and appealing to a broader audience. The conservative public sphere can build a resilient and dynamic presence by demonstrating how conservative principles can address contemporary challenges and respect diversity while upholding traditional values. Fostering a thriving conservative public sphere in India requires a nuanced approach that integrates ideological clarity, media engagement, educational outreach, intellectual discourse, community support, political strategy, and inclusivity. By implementing these strategies, conservatism can establish a prominent and influential role in shaping India's public discourse, policy, and cultural life.

The role of media and digital platforms is pivotal in advancing the conservative public sphere. Strategic use of traditional media—such as newspapers and television—coupled with innovative digital outreach through social media platforms can significantly expand the reach of conservative voices. Crafting compelling content that speaks to modern issues from a conservative

perspective and employing data analytics to tailor messages can enhance the visibility and influence of conservative discourse. Such a comprehensive media strategy helps shape public perception and foster a broader engagement with conservative ideas.

Engagement with the Western Conservatism

In his concluding remarks in *What is Conservatism*, John Kekes asserts, “The strongest version of conservatism is then moral, reflective, moderately sceptical, pluralistic, traditionalist, and realistically pessimistic.”⁴ This formulation offers a robust framework for Indian conservatism, suggesting that a balanced approach—one that is rooted in moral principles, open to reflection and scepticism, respectful of diversity, anchored in tradition, and tempered by a realistic view of human nature, holds the greatest promise for fostering a stable and just society. By embracing these characteristics, Indian conservatism can distinguish itself as a compelling alternative, capable of guiding the nation toward a harmonious future that honors its cultural heritage while navigating the complexities of modern life.

Howard L. Erdman, in his work *Conservative Politics in India*, observed that “Indian conservatism is, thus, more potent than might be suggested to the casual eye,” noting that much of this conservatism was latent or disguised, not always visible through the explicit positions of political parties.⁵ Erdman predicted that with the passing of Nehru, there would be “an increase in overt conservative activity,” a forecast that has indeed materialised over time. Today, we see the realisation of Erdman’s insights as Indian

conservatism has moved from the shadows into the mainstream. What was once a latent force has become a prominent influence in shaping the nation’s political and cultural landscape. The groundwork for a robust conservative movement in India has been laid, and it continues to grow, reflecting the deep-seated values and traditions that Erdman identified decades ago.

This transformation underscores the enduring strength of Indian conservatism, which now plays a pivotal role in guiding the nation’s future. In discussing the influence of Western thought on India, Swapan Dasgupta highlights that while figures like Bentham and Marx significantly shaped modern Indian intellectual life, the influences on Indian conservatism have mainly been indigenous.⁶ Rooted in Sanskrit literature, culture, and tradition, Indian conservatism diverges from its Western counterpart, drawing on local sources of authority and wisdom. This indigenous conservatism has not been as thoroughly studied or documented, making it a fertile area for further exploration. Understanding this distinct trajectory is crucial for appreciating the uniqueness of Indian conservatism, particularly in how it blends with or resists Western ideological frameworks.

In the past 200-300 years, liberalism has evolved significantly from its classical roots, adapting to new global challenges and contexts. Contemporary liberalism has grappled with a range of complex issues, including radical Islam, cultural Marxism, and the impact of globalisation. These developments have brought to the forefront new threats to democracy, societal cohesion, and international order. Issues such as China’s expansionist policies, radical Islamist movements, and challenges related to illegal immigration have

raised concerns about global stability and democratic integrity. As a response, new conservative parties and ideologies are emerging worldwide, aiming to address these threats and restore balance. This resurgence of conservatism is not merely a reaction but a proactive attempt to navigate the evolving global landscape and counteract threats that jeopardise peace, socio-cultural stability, and national security.

India faces similar challenges, with its geopolitical position making it vulnerable to issues such as radical Islamism and the expansionist tendencies of China. Additionally, the issue of illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar adds another layer of complexity. In this context, the revival of conservatism in India is a political phenomenon and a response to these pressing challenges. Comparing Indian and Western conservatism provides valuable insights into their respective trajectories and impacts. This comparison can help illuminate the similarities and differences between these two forms of conservatism and their implications for the global ideological landscape.

The conservative public sphere in India has grown stronger politically and is increasingly shaping other areas of public life, including culture, academia, and media. The demographic strength of India, combined with its robust conservative forces, provides a unique opportunity for Indian conservatism to align with its Western counterparts. This alignment can be beneficial in addressing common threats and navigating shared challenges. While there are contentious issues and differences between Indian and Western conservatism, there are also significant areas of commonality. Both face similar global challenges

and threats, and their collaboration could enhance their ability to respond effectively.

By focusing on shared objectives and finding common ground, Indian and Western conservatism can work together to safeguard democratic values, maintain peace, and preserve cultural integrity in the face of evolving global dynamics. As conservatism continues to shape political and cultural landscapes in both contexts, a collaborative approach could provide a stronger, more unified response to the complex issues facing democracies worldwide. Embracing this collaboration while navigating contentious issues can lead to a more resilient and effective conservative movement that benefits India and the broader international community. The case for fostering a conservative public sphere in India is not merely about bolstering a particular political ideology but ensuring a balanced and pluralistic environment where diverse perspectives can engage meaningfully.

Conservatism, as a philosophy, does not claim to offer ultimate answers to society's complex and evolving challenges. Instead, it serves a vital function by reminding us of the institutional prerequisites of social order—those foundational structures that underpin stability and continuity. When these institutional pillars are threatened or weakened, conservatism becomes relevant and essential, providing the necessary counterbalance to rapid change and ideological upheaval.⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case for building a conservative public sphere in India is deeply intertwined with the need for a robust, pluralistic environment that transcends transient political landscapes. While the current political dispensation

may provide a platform for conservative ideas, this alone is insufficient for conservatism's long-term sustainability and intellectual legitimacy. A conservative public sphere must be grounded in the deeper currents of India's cultural and intellectual heritage, cultivated through continuous engagement with a broad spectrum of ideologies.

The health of any democracy relies on the diversity of voices and perspectives that challenge, refine, and balance each other. A space where conservatism thrives naturally—not because it is imposed or politically advantageous but because it is a vital part of the national discourse—ensures that Indian conservatism remains dynamic and evolves organically within the fabric of society. To achieve this, a vibrant conservative public sphere must be rooted in intellectual rigour and public engagement, ensuring it does not remain isolated from other ideological frameworks. It should be a space where conservatism is not merely reactionary or nostalgic but a forward-looking philosophy that adapts to contemporary challenges while preserving core values. This requires engagement with diverse ideas—liberal, progressive, socialist, and others—thus fostering an arena where ideas are contested, debated, and refined. Such a sphere would safeguard the integrity of conservative thought and allow it to evolve in response to societal needs and global developments, preventing it from becoming dogmatic or outdated.

Moreover, a thriving conservative public sphere must emerge from civil society, academia, media, and cultural institutions, which play crucial roles in shaping public opinion and discourse. These spaces should nurture thoughtful conservative intellectuals,

writers, and public figures who can articulate conservative ideas in ways that resonate with the broader public. The role of conservative think tanks, educational institutions, and cultural forums is paramount in this regard, as they provide platforms for sustained ideological exchange and reflection, allowing conservatism to articulate its responses to contemporary issues such as globalisation, technological change, and shifting social values. Building such a public sphere also ensures that conservative ideas are not marginalised in academia or the media. A truly inclusive and democratic public sphere must resist the temptation to sideline any ideology. Instead, it should promote a balanced discourse where all ideologies, including conservatism, can critically engage. In this setting, conservatism would not merely be a counterpoint to progressivism but would emerge as an influential and constructive force that contributes to nation-building and social cohesion.

By making space for conservatism in the broader intellectual and public discourse, India can foster a dynamic interplay of ideas essential for a thriving democracy. In this pluralistic environment, conservatism would find its place as one of many competing and cooperating ideologies that shape the contours of Indian society. This is not merely about achieving ideological balance but about recognising that a flourishing public sphere, where different viewpoints engage meaningfully with each other, strengthens the social and political fabric of the nation. Through this approach, conservatism would be seen not as a relic of the past or a fleeting political trend but as a vital, evolving force within the spectrum of India's ideological landscape, contributing to its democratic vitality.

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The Future of Non-Proliferation and India's role in the Emerging China-Pakistan Nuclear Nexus of Global Strategic Trade System

Arpan A Chakravarty*

Introduction:

Recently, the Indian authorities seized a dual-use item during its port call in India. Upon inspection, it was discovered that the item was being shipped from China to Pakistan, marking the second seizure¹ in the last few months.

The Pakistan Foreign Ministry has issued a statement² stating that the delivery of its 'commercial goods' was being disrupted as the material was a supply part for an automobile industry in Pakistan. Further, the Pakistani Spokesperson stated³ it was a 'violation of international norms and taking arbitrary measures in violation of international law'. This has garnered a response⁴ from Beijing, as the Spokesperson of China's diplomatic mission in New Delhi stated that the 'materials were no means a piece of military equipment or a dual-use item covered by China's non-proliferation export control regime'. Such incidents need to

be analysed from national security and international law perspectives.

This is not the first instance where China and Pakistan have been involved in concerted efforts to circumvent the global export system. The Chinese government's support in enabling Pakistan's network of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) procurement activities has long been a fundamental concern for the Indian authorities.

China's consistent support in enabling Pakistan's illicit acquisition of dual-use items and sensitive technologies has been a practice. This deepening nexus between China and Pakistan poses a grave threat to India's national security, as well as flouts numerous rules regarding non-proliferation and international cooperation for strategic trade control of such items. Through this article, we will explore the nexus between China and Pakistan's nexus to circumvent the global strategic trade norms with instances.

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India, Wassenaar Arrangement and International Export System:

In December 2022, India assumed the G20 presidency and, concurrently, the Plenary Chairmanship of the Wassenaar Arrangement (WA).⁵ As the 42nd participating state, India joined this multilateral export control regime. The WA promotes transparency and responsibility in the transfer of conventional arms and dual-use technologies through regular information exchange among its members. By preventing destabilising accumulations, the WA aims to preserve international peace and security and reduce the likelihood of armed conflicts. Notably, neither Pakistan⁶ nor China⁷ is a member of this arrangement. The Plenary, the decision-making body of the WA, operates on consensus and works closely with other member states. India's assumption of the Plenary Chairmanship in January 2023 marked a one-year term, during which it was responsible for updating the control lists annually in consultation with other members.⁸

The authorities seized two Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines, which have recognised military applications and limited civilian use. Customs Authorities detained the goods because they are classified as dual-use items, a category addressed by the Wassenaar Arrangement. Historically, North Korea has utilised CNC machines to advance its nuclear program, even in the face of international sanctions.

Dual-use items⁹ can have both civilian and military applications or, worse, be used for terrorism. This leads to higher due diligence on the export of these materials. Throughout history, states and territorial entities have restricted the

export of arms and related equipment for national security reasons. However, the scope of exporting such goods has significantly broadened, including technologies, software, and others that may also have civilian and military applications. Nations under sanctions or tight scrutiny resort to exploiting the international export control system to get hold of these materials and technologies – thus inherently – exploiting the international export control system.

India's Strategic Trade Control Laws:

Nations on the watchlist often develop front companies to procure equipment, materials, and technologies for their weapons programs. These exports typically reflect capabilities built over the years by creating elaborate networks of shell companies, procurement agents, and complex documentation for years to facilitate such transfers. Due to the volume of ship movement, the use of ships is the most preferred method of transfer – which further complicates the task for security agencies, leaving them to search for a needle in a haystack.

In early May this year, the Indian customs authorities at the Kattupalli port in Tamil Nadu seized¹⁰ and intercepted a consignment bound for Karachi originating from Shanghai. The consignment contained the chemical Ortho-Chloro Benzylidene Malononitrile (CS), which is primarily used for riot control but can also be a potential chemical weapon. The dual-use nature of this chemical led to its inclusion on the lists of the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Chemical Weapons Convention, thus being a ground for Indian authorities to seize it. The seizure of the

chemicals had an interesting timing; as tensions continue to mount in the Balochistan region of Pakistan, this covert supply by China would not be a far-fetched idea. Furthermore, considering the number of attacks on Chinese nationals and Pakistan's inability to secure several CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) projects¹¹ can be one of the reasons for such transfers in the region.

India's strategic trade control laws and regulations¹² manage the flow of goods, services, and technologies across borders. These laws and regulations are the culmination of national and international laws and codes of conduct that balance a country's commercial and security considerations. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540¹³ obliges all member states to prohibit the access of WMD and their delivery system to non-actors. It creates a universal obligation for all states to take and enforce measures to establish domestic controls to prevent the proliferation of such weapons. This prohibition includes the delivery of it as well to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Typically, a standard resolution is not binding on countries unless passed by the Security Council, in which case it becomes binding in international law. India is a party¹⁴ to three major multilateral export control regimes—the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Australia Group, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). These international rules on export control are laid down by international agreements concluded among states.

India has robust rules based on proliferation and strategic trade, which have evolved over the last few decades. It is based on the elements of

international law that prohibit access to WMD and its delivery to non-state actors. Some relevant legislations include the Weapons of Mass Destruction and their Delivery Systems (Prohibition of Unlawful Activities) Act of 2005; the United Nations (Security Council) Act of 1947; the Customs Act of 1962; the Foreign Trade (Development and Regulations) Act of 1992; the Arms Act of 1959; the Atomic Energy Act of 1962; the Chemical Weapons Convention Act of 2000; the Explosives Act 1884; among the others.

Furthermore, the Export-Import Policy 1995 includes controls on the export of specified goods, services, and technology, including the regularly updated SCOMET list. The Department of Atomic Energy, Directorate General of Foreign Trade, and Ministry of Defence have jurisdiction over the development of these regulations. Additionally, the scope of such lists is determined through an Inter-Ministerial Working Group that assesses the associated risks.

China-Pakistan Nexus, Scrutiny, and Challenges to Compliance:

When an export authorisation is granted, several key questions are typically raised - 'what', 'where', 'who', and 'how' are evaluated. *First*, the specific products being exported are listed and carefully classified based on their technical specifications and capabilities. This categorisation helps determine whether the items are considered military, dual-use, or commercial. *Second*, the destination country for the export is an important factor, as the geopolitical situation and potential for diversion or misuse in that region are closely evaluated. *Third*, whether the recipient state is

subject to international sanctions or embargoes is a crucial consideration, as these legal restrictions limit the legitimate transfer of such sensitive goods. *Finally*, the end-user and their intended use of the items are thoroughly examined to ensure the exports will not be used for malicious or unauthorised purposes. These comprehensive parameters help guide the legitimate and responsible transfer of weapons and other strategically controlled items. Additionally, sanction laws strictly restrict the export of military and dual-

use items to embargoed states and entities, as these factors are meticulously evaluated at every level of the decision-making process.

However, challenges remain when nations such as China violate international commitments even after agreeing/not agreeing to these export regimes through consensus, creating its own export rules which fit its understanding. In recent years, the author has collated¹⁵ a list of instances wherein the nexus between China and Pakistan has continued to grow:

No	Route	Year	Supplier	Supplied	Caught	Analysis
1.	Jiangyin to Qasim	2020	M/s General Technology (China)	National Development Complex (NDC) (Pakistan)	Kandla, India	Ship hauled was named Dai Cui Yun (Singaporean Flagged from Hong Kong) Industrial Dryers – Meant for National Development Complex (NDC), a Pakistani Entity involved in the development of Pakistan’s long-range ballistic missiles.
2.	Ningbo to Karachi	2021	M/s Hangzhou Chengyingyi Energy Technology Co. Ltd. (China)	M/s Ghani Global Holdings (Pakistan)	Nhava Sheva, Mumbai	Cryogenic Oxygen Tanks for the usage in Pakistan’s Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO) The Carrier name was “Felixstowe Bridge” which was seized.
3.	Shanghai to Karachi	2022	M/s Taiyuan Mining Import and Export Co Ltd (China)	Cosmos Engineering (Pakistan)	Nhava Sheva, Mumbai	Consignment of thermo-electric instruments sourced from an Italian Company M/s Distek Strumenti & Misure SRL (DSM) by Cosmos Engineering allegedly for AQ Khan Research Laboratory.

4.	Shanghai to Karachi	2022	M/s Suzhou Kanjia Clean Technology Ltd (China)	DESTO (Pakistan)	Nhava Sheva, Mumbai	The container vessel 'Kota Megah,' sailing under the Singaporean flag, was shipping four containers. These containers held high-end equipment intended for producing/manufacturing chemical materials
5.	Qingdao Port to Karachi	2023	World Panda Logistics Co Ltd (China)	Emerging Future Solutions Pvt Ltd (Pakistan) – a shell company associated with Pakistan's Defence Science and Technology Organization (DESTO)	Nhava Sheva, Mumbai	Jacketed glass reactors and other key laboratory equipment required for WMD programs were found on a Malta-flagged ship named CMA CGM Figaro. Pakistan's DESTO is a sanctioned entity by the BIS of the United States Commerce Department for its involvement in WMD programs.
6.	Shekou Port to Karachi	2024	Shanghai JXE Global Logistics Co Ltd (China) – Taiyuan Mining Import & Export Co Ltd (China)	Pakistan Wings Pvt Ltd (Pakistan)	Nhava Sheva, Mumbai	The customs officials flagged a Malta-flagged merchant ship named CMA CGM Attila, which was carrying CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machinery. Pakistan Wings Pvt Ltd have been involved in shipping of restricted items from destinations such as China, Turkey, and Italy among the others for Pakistan.
7.	Shanghai to Karachi	2024	Chengdu Shichen Trading Company Ltd (China)	Rohail Enterprises (Pakistan)	Kattupalli, Chennai	A ship bound for Karachi, named 'Hyundai Shanghai' and sailing under the Cyprus flag, was confiscated with a chemical called ortho-Chloro Benzylidene Malononitrile or CS. This shipment contained 2,560 kg of this chemical, which has varied applications.

Thus, the deepening nexus between Pakistan and China, exemplified through these covert transfers of dual-use technologies and sensitive items, underscores the ongoing challenges of nations circumventing global strategic trade control systems. Despite robust measures taken by India, these continued transfers highlight the complexities of regional and international peace in the South Asian Region. With this, there is a need for monitoring, sanctioning, and plugging holes in the illegal proliferation of nuclear items, dual technologies, and items that can further develop the nuclear program.

Pragmatism in Balancing Interests:

In the past, China had a troubling record of assisting various states with their nuclear and missile programs, despite its public commitment¹⁶ in 2000 to refrain from aiding any country in the development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons and sharing sensitive technologies. The lack of a standardised global approach to control the trade of dual-use goods and sensitive technologies has allowed China to become a supplier¹⁷ of such items to countries like Iran, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, among others.

Furthermore, the fact that China is not a member of the major international export control regimes, such as the Australia Group, Missile

Technology Control Regime, and Wassenaar Arrangement, further complicates the implementation and enforcement of regulations on these sensitive goods¹⁸, as the applicable rules and procedures may vary widely across different countries and jurisdictions. This creates a significant risk of diversion, including through the falsification of documents and the circumvention of export controls. There is an urgent need for robust screening and scrutiny of such investments and trade activities to mitigate the risks, particularly regarding the end user and the intended use of the goods and technologies.

Moreover, the rapid evolution of technologies, especially in the military application of artificial intelligence¹⁹ and space sectors, and troubles in the neighbourhood²⁰ regarding Bangladesh will pose significant challenges for policymakers and regulators to keep pace with these advancements while maintaining effective export control measures. This challenge will continue to haunt the security apparatus of countries enforcing export control as they struggle to adapt their policies and procedures to address the constantly changing technological landscape. The involvement of non-state actors, such as terrorist groups or nations that use terrorism as a strategic tool, further complicates the issue, as these entities may exploit the weaknesses in the export control system for their illicit purposes.

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Exploring the Growth of Hinduism and other Hindu Religious Traditions in Champa

Shivani Badgaiyan*

Introduction

Hinduism is often regarded as the oldest living civilisation in the world and can be traced back approximately 4,000 years. We have examined numerous texts regarding Buddhism's influence across many regions outside India, yet there is less evidence of Hinduism's impact globally. Indian culture and Hinduism appear to be closely intertwined in various ancient texts, and this paper focuses explicitly on the influence of Hinduism in Champa. This region encompasses central and southern Vietnam. Champa was a long, narrow strip of territory, bordered by mountains to the west and the sea to the east and intersected by countless hills. The influence of Hinduism on the land of Champa also provides profound insight into the integration of Hindu civilisation within a foreign context.

As mentioned in India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture¹, the unifying aspect of Indian culture extended beyond the mainland of the Indian subcontinent, reaching the Southeast Asian nations and thereby enhancing the cultural bond. References to Southeast Asia in Indian literature can be traced back to the last centuries B.C. and the early centuries C.E. in texts such as the Arthashastra, the Maha Niddesa, the Ramayana,

the Mahabharata, the Dharmasastras, as well as in various Puranas and Jataka tales.² Sanskrit inscriptions evidence the establishment of Indian kingdoms in Southeast Asia found at Champa (second to third century C.E.), the Kutei inscriptions of Mulavarman from East Borneo (fifth century C.E.), and the Taruma inscriptions from West Java.

The Chinese records mention Kiu-liens, a tribe from beyond the frontier of Chinese territories that attacked their southernmost districts, destroyed the Chinese forts, and ravaged the whole country in the year 137 CE.³ These individuals, possessing great military skill and organisation, ultimately formed the kingdom of Champa from the conquered territory of the Chinese empire⁴ and left epigraphic records in Sanskrit.

A.P. Patnaik⁵ says that these Kiu-liens were quite likely a branch of the Kula people of Burma, whom G.E. Gerini has described as people from Kalinga. According to Gerini,⁶ the term Kula was used in Burma to designate Western foreigners in general and the people from south India in particular. H.B. Sarkar,⁷ a scholar on the history of Southeast Asia, has also identified the Kula people of Burma with the Kalinga people. Thus, it was possible that sometime in the first century CE

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or even before, the Kula people, also known as Kiu-liens, migrated in considerable numbers from Kalinga to Burma and other lower regions of Indo-China via land or sea. This was one of the theories on the beginnings of the Champa kingdom.

The other mentioned in the Chinese chronicles, around 192 C.E., is a kingdom established in the region of the present city of Hue in Vietnam, which the Chinese named Linyi but which Sanskrit literature referred to as Champa. Champa derived its name from the term Chams, yet it lacked epigraphical proof until the beginning of the seventh century; however, earlier historical records do mention the term 'kingdom of Chams.' The Cham people were believed to be of Austronesian origin, belonging to an Indonesian linguistic group, and they were ethnically and culturally distinct from the Viets in the north and the Khmers in the west. Wen-Hsien T'ung-k'ao, a Chinese work by the author Ma Tuan-lin, also provides a clear picture of Cham society in the second half of the fourth century CE when it had already adopted a significant measure of Indian culture traditions.⁸

Historical Context: The Initial Introduction of Hinduism

Communication between any two regions in ancient times was established through trade exchanges, as seen in the relationship between India and Southeast Asia. Archaeological evidence indicates that trade developed in these regions around the 2nd century C.E. The discovery of items such as shouldered adzes, knobbed ware, and glass beads from various sites in India and modern Vietnam (ancient Champa) points to interactions between the two regions in prehistoric

times.⁹ The oldest cultural evidence in Champa is of a Buddha statue in Amaravati style¹⁰ in Dong Duong in the Quang Nam province of Vietnam.¹¹

The nature of the cultural elements that were transmitted from India to Southeast Asia has been enumerated into four points by Prof D.G.E. Hall¹²: (1) a conception of royalty characterised by Hinduism and Buddhism, (2) literary expression through Sanskrit (3) mythological expressions from Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas that were reflected in the traditional genealogies of the royal families of the region (4) the observance of Dharmasastras or the 'Laws of Manu', incorporated in the region's religious texts. The author also explained the spread of Hinduism; when states came to be set up after the Indian pattern, the gods from many sites came to be united under one supreme god, Siva¹³, and the king was named Deva-raja (god-king, as people used to address) which in turn influenced the local society.¹⁴ The influence of Hinduism in Southeast Asia revolved around Siva and Visnu, at least during the initial period.¹⁵

Siva was regarded as the 'titular deity' of the kingdom of Champa. Saivism was the more influential of the Brahmanical sects, thus profoundly influencing the entire course of religious development compared to Buddhism and Vaisnavism. Brahmanism adhered to an Indianised form of Hinduism that thrived since the adoption of Hindu culture in the ancient era of Champa. In ancient times, vast temple complexes were constructed, primarily dedicated to Siva. These temple structures honoured Siva as the founder and protector of the Champa dynasty, and extravagant arrangements, fueled by the wealth

and resources of the kingdom, were made for his worship. The most important of these is known as My Son. Unfortunately, the main tower of the My Son complex was destroyed during the Vietnam War in 1969.

Spread of Hinduism: The Role of Trade and Cultural Exchange

Based on excavations in Thailand, it has been argued that India's maritime contact with Southeast Asia dates back to the 4th century B.C.¹⁶ Contact between India and Southeast Asia likely began earlier, but intensified around the start of the Christian era. One of the primary trade routes linking India and China passed through the coast of Champa, which became a vital hub for Indian merchants engaged in maritime trade in the Southeast Asian region. Hinduism was introduced to Champa through trade with the Indian subcontinent. As trade flourished, Indian merchants sought spices and gold, bringing with them Buddhist monks and Brahmans of Hinduism, who played a crucial role in transmitting Indian religious and cultural practices, including Hinduism, Sanskrit, and temple architecture. Thus, the Buddhist-Hindu culture established in Champa emerged from the commercial relations between Vietnam and India.

Due to their coastal location, the Chams favoured a seafaring culture, with trade primarily focused on spices and silk. From the second to the sixth century CE, Oc Eo was a significant and prosperous harbour city for trade, serving as an 'entrepot' for voyagers. Excavations at Oc Eo port have unearthed beads, seals with Sanskrit inscriptions, gold medallions, and rare pieces of sculpture, providing evidence that the area was a

vital hub for international trade between the Malay Peninsula and other regions of the world.¹⁷

We can also find a reference to the maritime contact between Kalinga and Champa in the Uttaradhyayana Sutra¹⁸, one of the sacred Jain texts. It highlights the significance of Pithunda, a port in the Kalinga region, utilised by both pilgrims and traders from Champa since the time of Mahavira, and the port town also became a centre of Jain religion. The Pithunda port is mentioned in the Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela, located in the Udaygiri caves in present-day Odisha. Additionally, the Uttaradhyayana Sutra refers to a merchant from Champa named Palita, who came to Pithunda port for trade, settled there, and married a Kalingan merchant's daughter.¹⁹ While returning to Champa, Palita's wife gave birth to a boy on the ship during the voyage²⁰, and the boy was named Samudrapala.

In addition to commercial relationships, strong cultural ties developed between the people of Vietnam and India, reflected in their art, architecture, literature, and social life. The socio-cultural and political centres were established at Vijaya (Binh Dinh), Kauthara (Nha Trang), Panduranga (Phan Rang), Indrapura (Dong Duong), and Amaravati (Quang Nam), all of which were significantly influenced by elements of Hinduism.

Architectural and Artistic Influences

The historical archaeological sites of Tra Kieu, My Son, Dong Duong, and Po Nagar provide significant evidence of the holy land of Champa. The Cham kingdom was divided into several natural provinces based on the coastal plains. Artistic

developments began around the seventh century, primarily at My Son and Tra Kieu. The temple architecture in Champa, which still exists today, began to take shape around the eighth and ninth centuries, characterised by a syncretic blend of outside influences and artistic originality. However, the earlier architectural remains have disappeared over time.

The regions that exhibited archaeological evidence include (1) Quang Nam, specifically the Thu Bon Valley, which encompasses the sites of My Son, Tra Kieu, and Dong Duong; (2) the area of Nha Trang featuring the Po Nagar complex; and (3) the region of Phan Rang.²¹ These were the centres of power on the territory of Champa, extending from the central to southern regions of present-day Vietnam. In addition to vast architectural complexes such as in Dong Duong, the art of the Chams included small, freestanding sculptures such as the sculpture of Uma, an elegant Goddess and wife of Siva. The earlier Cham architecture at My Son was similar to towers and arcades, with carved stone altar tables supporting images. In Binh Dinh, there are silver towers with pointed horseshoe chaitya arches. Later on, Indian influence declined, and huge, crude figures were executed in place of fine art.²²

Champa's earliest inscriptions, found in the Quang Nam and Phu Yen regions of Vietnam, have been associated with King Bhadravarman. The figures, similar to those of Gupta-Vakataka and Pallava-Chalukya sculptures in Champa, suggest the region's affinities to the mainland and the persistence of Indian culture in the region.

Most Indian-style monuments belong to the reign of Prakasa-Dharma, who adopted the regnal

title of Vikrantavarman after his coronation. Several of these monuments are dedicated to Visnu, whose worship appeared for the first time in Champa during his reign. Around the eighth century, more emphasis was placed on Saivism, and linga worship became increasingly significant. There are many examples of Mukhalinga, a stone covered with metal and decorated with one or more human faces, symbolising the king's identification with Siva.²³ This particular depiction is an interesting example of 'symbiosis' where the traditional and important cults were united to broaden the basis of the religion of the state.

There also has been contact established between Kalinga and Champa on archaeological lines. The finding of bar celts from the Sankarjang excavation site in the Angul region of Odisha demonstrated that the state's earliest musical instruments were similar to those found in Vietnam.²⁴ Another significant fact is about the sriyatsa motif of the Hathigumpha Inscription of emperor Kharavela which later became common in the coins of Oc Eo port from Vietnam to Myanmar (earlier named Arakan).²⁵

Similar lines can also be drawn between Bhubaneswar and My Son, as both places are identified as temple cities due to the construction of numerous Hindu temples. Like the early Odishan temples, the Cham temples feature a primary shrine at the center and a subsidiary one. The window openings were beautifully designed, reminiscent of the Rajarani temple in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, with their "baluster-shaped mullions".²⁶ The decorative motifs of the temples in My Son, especially the makara torana (crocodile-shaped archways), depict exquisitely

carved makara heads seen in the archways of the Muktesvara temple in Bhubaneswar. Certain Champa monuments also illustrate the dancing form of Siva balancing on the back of the bull, a common occurrence in the temples of Odisha Bengal.²⁷

In essence, all of the temples in Champa belong to a single type. They are often perched at an altitude and constructed of brickwork. Major temples of Champa are arranged on a square terrace with three towers above. The image of God, which usually faces east, is at the centre of the sanctuary. Another structure with a similar design that runs from east to west is the porch. Occasionally, two auxiliary shrines, which could be regarded as later extensions, are constructed in the same north-south orientation as the main sanctuary. Each of these structures is surrounded by a wall, and the only way to enter is via an eastward-facing gate tower. The sanctuary's interior is a square room. The exterior of the sanctuary consists of a square tower topped with a shikhara.

My son, Don Duong, and Po Nagar are three significant temple groups; the second is Buddhist, while the other two are Shaivite in nature. The Chams incorporated new elements into their designs without fully replicating the Indian prototypes; however, their overall appearance was derived from the fundamental and distinctive features of Indian style.²⁸

Indravarman II founded a new capital named Indrapura in Quang Nam province and is credited with establishing Buddhism in Champa. Along those lines, the ruins of a monastery have been located in Dong Duong, which is situated southeast

of My Son. This is the first evidence of Mahayana Buddhism's existence in Champa. Indravarman II established the sixth dynasty in Champa's history. The kings of this lineage were more involved in the country's religious life than their predecessors. They constructed new sanctuaries and protected and restored religious foundations after desecration. Additionally, they erected inscriptions detailing their donations to temples and monasteries.²⁹

The inscriptions of Bhadravarman were the first documents of the Indian religion. The inscriptions reveal the dominance of the worship of Siva-Uma, and Bhadresvara was represented as the oldest known royal linga in "Farther India"³⁰. The inscriptions of Champa contain references to ritualistic rites and Vedic sacrifices. In Champa, the worship of the Hindu trinity—Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesvara, or Shiva—was widely recognised. The influence of writing, mainly from southern India, has also been carried over to Southeast Asian countries through the transmission of customs.

There also has been a reference to the partially damaged Vo Canh Rock Inscription (on palaeographic grounds from the second or third century CE), found near the village of Vo-Canh in the province of Khanh Hoa and has been regarded as the first epigraph in Champa³¹ which in Sanskrit refers to the first kingdom in Champa by the royal family of Sri Mara, who was considered to be a Kalingan.³² According to the Chinese chronicles, King Sri Mara was a Saiva by faith and called himself in the Vo Canh Inscription for having a Kalingan origin. It could be concluded that Sri Mara founded a Hindu dynasty in Champa in the second century CE.³³ In the latter years of the Eastern

Ganga dynasty's rule in Odisha, in the early mediaeval period, the practice of setting loose an elephant to select the heir in the absence of an heir was also followed in Champa.

Two Cho Dinh Rock Inscriptions were discovered in the village of Nhan Thap, situated in what is now Phu Yen province in Vietnam. The inscriptions featured the names Dharmamaharaja Bhadravarman and Bhadresvarasvamin. The second name refers to Siva, to whom King Bhadravarman constructed a temple named Bhadresvara, as mentioned in his inscription from My Son.³⁴

Indian epigraphy has significantly contributed to the dissemination and evolution of script, alongside the region's linguistic development. Inscriptions discovered in Champa primarily utilized two languages: Cham and Sanskrit. The Sanskrit inscriptions demonstrate considerable rhetorical skills, indicating that Indian linguistics was in early use beyond the region India.³⁵ The earliest known use of Sanskrit in Champa inscriptions dates to the latter part of the fourth century, just before similar works from Borneo and Java's Malay Peninsula became available. The first known inscription in the Cham language, based on palaeographic evidence, dates from the fourth century and is from Dong Yen Chau, which is near Tra Kieu.³⁶ The early development of the Thu Bon Valley, where My Son is situated, is linked to the first cohesive collection of inscriptions. There are twenty inscriptions, all in Sanskrit, dating from the fifth to the late eighth century, except for two that are in or near My Son.³⁷

As mentioned in R.C. Majumdar's Champa³⁸, out of 130 inscriptions discovered in Champa and

published in his volume, about 21 do not refer to any religious sect in particular. Of the rest, 92 refer to Siva and the gods associated with him, three to Visnu, five to Brahma, and seven to Buddha, while two refer to both Siva and Visnu. The two principal regions for these temples in ancient Champa were My Son and Po Nagar.

Syncretism and Adaptation of Hinduism

Since Southeast Asians may have had contact with India before the arrival of the Aryans, it is likely that they did not perceive Indian culture as distinct from their own. In mainland Southeast Asia, kingship most likely developed in two ways. The first occurred when an Indian, as in the case of the founding of the kingdom of Funan, married the daughter of a local chief and then proclaimed himself king. The second instance, exemplified by numerous incidents in Indonesia, involved a local chief inviting Indian brahmins to perform rituals for him according to Indian custom. Although other regions of the Indian subcontinent also had an influence, the southern part of the region was primarily responsible for Indian influence. These factors would have been a major catalyst for ingraining and spreading the values of Indian culture within the local community.

The Hinduism practiced in Champa was profoundly influenced by Saivism. As ancient texts reveal, Bhadravarman (also referred to as Bhavavarman in some accounts) was the founder of the first Hindu sanctuary in Champa by erecting a Siva-linga named after himself, Siva-Bhadresvara, which linked the name of the god with his own. It is the earliest royal linga on record

in mainland Southeast Asia³⁹ and was constructed in the Cirque of My Son, the reference to which is found in the inscriptions. Bhadravarman's capital was discovered on the eastern side of My Son, at the location of present-day Tra Kieu. The surroundings of this site have yielded stone inscriptions in a script that matches the existing inscriptions. An intriguing insight mentioned in R.C. Majumdar's Champa⁴⁰ is that the kings of Champa competed to place images of Siva, as this was considered pious. Furthermore, they identified or associated themselves with the gods by adding their names to the god's name and occasionally making the god's image resemble their own

The influence of Saivism in Champa was depicted through Siva-linga worship, which became a very popular cult in the region. The primary emblems included the lingam, Mukhalinga, segmented liE gam, jam âliE gam, and koœa Saivism.⁴¹ Adapting this form of worship also influenced the neighbouring regions of Java and Cambodia, as evidenced by the cultures and traditions of their local populations today. An example can be found in an inscription from Tra Kien in Champa, which indicates that King Prakasa-Dharma dedicated an image and temple to Valmiki. This also serves as evidence of the influence of Hinduism and its religious texts.⁴²

By the end of the ninth century, the Cham people had adapted to Hinduism. They used royal rituals to invoke God Siva to protect their territories and lineage.⁴³ The Chams' spirituality was dominated by Siva worship, and their artistic achievements reflected the same.

The second deity associated with the Siva cult was Ganesa, also called Vinayaka. It is known

from an inscription⁴⁴ that he was worshipped in a distinct temple at Po Nagar. He also had two temples at My Son. The image of Ganesa has often been found in other Saiva temples, sometimes alongside those of Goddess Bhagavati (Uma or Parvati) and Kartikeya, his mother and brother, respectively. The extant images of Ganesa at Champa are so numerous that at one time, he seemed even more popular than that of Uma, his mother.⁴⁵

Although not as prominent as Saivism, Vaisnavism also played an important role in Champa. While there are not many inscriptions that are distinctly Vaisnavite, the widespread influence of Vaisnavism in the region was evident from the numerous incidental references to Visnu. He was known by various names, such as Purusottama, Narayana, Hari, Govinda, Madhava, and Vikrama Tribhuvanakranta.⁴⁶ We also studied the prevalence of worshipping Visnu alongside Goddess Lakshmi in both regions of Kalinga and Champa, highlighting their cultural and religious connections in earlier times. Prakasa-Dharma constructed a temple for Visnu Purushottama in the seventh century CE at Dong Duong. The worship of Visnu in the kingdom of Champa, as well as Jagannath at Puri in Odisha, also indicates a profound cultural relationship between the two regions.⁴⁷

Laksmi, also referred to as Padma and Sri in some texts, was a well-known goddess of Champa. She is mentioned multiple times in different inscriptions, and her "proverbial inconstancy" has been emphasized in various accounts. It is also well-known from the inscriptions that Laksmi is considered a symbol of sovereignty in Indian

tradition. The inscriptions state that she was born in the Kailasa mountain, although Indian tradition regards her as emerging from the ocean of milk during the churning of the ocean.⁴⁸ There is evidence of the prevalence of the worship of Goddess Shakti during the seventh and eighth centuries CE in the Kauthara region (present-day Nha Trang region) of southern Champa. Vicitrasagara constructed a temple for Devi Bhagavati in the eighth century CE and was one of the presiding deities of Champa. Conversely, around the same period, the worship of Goddess Bhagavati began at Rankada or Bankada (present-day Banapur in Odisha) on the coast of Kalinga.⁴⁹ Therefore, it seems there was a strong cultural connection between ancient Kalinga and Champa during that period. Evidence has also shown the presence of icons of various other gods and goddesses such as Indra, Surya, Kubera, and Sarasvati, among others.

There was also a system of ‘Devadasis’—‘female dancers’—who dedicated their lives to the service of the god, a characteristic feature of Indian temples that persists in many places in both Vietnam and India. The Chams were significantly influenced by Hindu culture; they did not eat beef, widows did not remarry, and the queen performed sati after the death of the king.⁵⁰ The enormous wealth of the temples of Champa also reminded the wealth and grandeur of the temples of India. The prevalence of Hinduism in Champa was interrupted for a time in the ninth and tenth centuries CE during the reign of Indravarman II when he built a giant Buddhist monastery⁵¹ in Indrapura (modern Dong Duong in the Quang Nam Province) and adopted Mahayana Buddhism as

its faith. He built a giant Buddhist monastery and meditation halls for the monks.

Around the tenth century CE, Hinduism again rose as the predominant religion. Other sites that yielded important works of religious art and architecture aside from My Son were Khuong My, Chanh Lo (Quang Nam province), and Thap Mam (Binh Dinh province).

R.C. Majumdar⁵² mentions a characteristic feature of the religious development in Champa, which entailed the spirit of tolerance marked from beginning to end. Despite the prevalence of sectarianism and the coexistence of two or three major Brahmanical sects alongside Buddhism, there is no mention of religious animosity in the region. By the late 15th century, Annam had annexed the entirety of Champa. The Chinese recognised a succession of kings from Champa until 1543; however, most of the Chams later fled to Cambodian territories in the south.⁵³

Conclusion

The growth of Hinduism and its religious traditions in the ancient kingdom of Champa significantly shaped the region’s religious beliefs, cultural practices, and socio-political structures. Hinduism, particularly the worship of Shiva and Vishnu along with other deities, became deeply intertwined with the spiritual lives of the Cham people, influencing everything from temple architecture to daily rituals. The construction of grand temples by the rulers symbolised their religious devotion and efforts to legitimise their authority by aligning themselves with divine powers and associating their names with the Sivalinga. Hindu epics like the Ramayana and

Mahabharata played a pivotal role in disseminating Hindu ideals, values, and traditions, assisting in the establishment of a unique religious identity in Champa. Over time, Hinduism in Champa facilitated a rich exchange of spiritual ideas between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia while also fortifying local religious institutions.

Though the decline of Hinduism's legacy in Champa, prompted by the rise of Islam, eventually brought both traditional and geographical changes for the Cham people, it left an enduring mark on Cham art and culture, as well as contemporary spiritual practices. The theoretical focus should be on how religious pluralism and cultural adaptation

fostered traditions that endured through centuries of transformation. There was a cultural alignment between the two regions of the world, observable through the lens of adaptation rather than mere transplantation.

Lastly, the major point to highlight is that the Indian influence had no political implications, unlike the Chinese influence, which involved absorption by the native societies in Southeast Asia. Although Vietnam was under Chinese rule and subjected to intensive Sinicisation, the Vietnamese people developed a culture that nonetheless preserved its own identity, with roots tracing back to a pre-Chinese past.

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