

# BRICS Diplomacy: India-China Relations

\*Nida Rahman<sup>1</sup>, Sheena Rehman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research and Information System for Developing Countries, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Commerce, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

\*Correspondence: nidarahman88@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

The US-China Trade war followed by the global pandemic has reincarnated the diplomatic relations between countries. India-China relations have remained on a roller coaster ride with expectations for the unexpected future. India and China share a cooperative geo-political platform of BRICS and much needs to be assessed with India holding the chairmanship in 2021. The article touches upon the BRICS issues from the perspective of India-China relations as well as the expectations from the current regime. An attempt to decipher India's stand on key issues such as pandemic cooperation, anti-terrorism, multilateral system reform *et cetera* is encapsulated in the article.

**KEYWORDS:** BRICS, Diplomacy, Indo-China Cooperation, Pandemic.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

BRICS was first pushed by India in January 2009 by the then Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh. The idea was originally proposed by Jim O'Neil based on the collective power of the demographic and economic factors (O'Neill, 2001). The first BRICS summit was held in 2009, with everyone being unaware of its future. However, it prevailed amid several ups and down (market fluctuations), crises (global economic crisis), conflicts such as the Indo-China border dispute, and disagreement on non-tariff measures (NTM) at World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meetings (Gupta, 2019). In 2021, India is chairing the 13<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit with the motto "*BRICS @ 15: Intra-BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation, and Consensus*" (BRICS India, 2021). This year's BRICS meeting has a challenging task due to the pandemic. The US-China trade war has demonstrated possible areas of cooperation, competition, and contentions. India-China relations have remained one of the most complex ones to predict, from border conflicts to economic cooperation. The change in the Indian regime with Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014 till present) is also important to read between the lines, else the picture will be messy for the future Indo-China relations. BRICS countries' cooperation and vaccine diplomacy need to be highlighted as an achievement in the pandemic, several ministerial meetings were held between the BRICS countries for sharing health and safety measures. At the onset of the pandemic, China felt the burnt of the contempt as coronavirus originator, but the US foreign policy space changed with President Biden in power. The future of Indo-China relations should be seen in the backdrop of these events and the new administration of Prime Minister Modi in India.

## 2. INDIA'S BRICS DIPLOMACY

India is one of the most active members of BRICS and has shown substantial energy towards BRICS policy activities. India's Look East Policy since 1991 has helped to give due importance to regional cooperation and rule-based cooperation between countries with similar interests. BRICS is a recognition of India's interest in regional cooperation with the objective of reforming the global order. Repeatedly, India has spoken, from the BRICS platform, about reforming the international economic order, to provide a rule-based non-discriminatory system (Gupta, 2016). Moreover, from the last decade, developing countries including India have given much recognition to regional trade agreements as they have "WTO plus" commitments. "WTO plus" commitments have additional agreements between countries on issues that WTO has not yet taken up, for example, digital trade, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS), etc.

### 2.1. INDIA'S STANCE ON BRICS AMID PANDEMIC AND US-CHINA TRADE WAR

The supposition that after the trade war and pandemic, India has started downgrading BRICS, which is not true. The evidence suggests otherwise. In 2020, when Russia held the chairmanship of BRICS, India's participation even in pandemic was encouraging; the number of virtual meets on medical cooperation was much more, in comparison to the meetings of 2019. In the pandemic, international trade was substantially affected and countries were using SPS and technical barriers to trade (TBT) measures to restrict imports/exports, including China (Giegling, 2021). Amid such a situation, BRICS countries agreed to the principle of transparency and information sharing for smooth intra-BRICS trade; an indication of India's faith

in BRICS diplomacy. PM Modi was quick enough to extend medical support in any manner possible to BRICS countries and talks at the level of ministerial meetings were regularly organized for confidence building between the countries. India has recently supported free patents for vaccines across BRICS countries showing faith in BRICS diplomacy (NDTV, 2021). With India taking the 2021 chairmanship, the focus remained on “resilient progress in the post covid19 world”. It would be justified to say that India is still tagging BRICS to be one of the important pillars of international diplomacy.

## **2.2. QUAD AND BRICS: INDIA’S BALANCE**

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) was formed in 2007 as an inter-governmental security arrangement between the US, Japan, Australia, and India, with the objective to secure the interests of these countries in the Indo-Pacific blue region. Though, in many clear words, it is to counter the domination of China in the Indo-Pacific blue region (Holmes, 2021). The organization was re-established with modified agreements in 2017, changes were done due to certain structural requirements. Several joint military exercises and regular military information sharing have been done under the Quad arrangement. Its scope is limited but of great importance due to its military nature (Gale, 2018). On the other hand, the structure of BRICS is not ratified, hence appears to be an inter-governmental cooperation arrangement without any ratified commitments. BRICS, in the early years, was just a PR mouthpiece of BRICS countries at the international level, but now things have changed. The scope of BRICS is comprehensive, focusing on economic, social, political, and military cooperation.

## **2.3. CHINA IN BRICS: COMPETITION OR COOPERATION**

A close look at the facts and figures for all BRICS countries suggests China is the most advancing country, if not powerful. China’s absolute GDP is more than the GDP of all four countries together, Yuan is the only currency recognized under the IMF basket of currencies, export contribution to the world is maximum among BRICS countries and even among social indicators such as mortality rate, education, sanitation, poverty, China is a better performer (Alam, Rahman, and Rahman, 2020). India’s participation in BRICS is partly motivated by the respective competitive edge of other BRICS countries and to focus on future knowledge transfer. India finds its strength, not in the indicators but the strategic importance and soft power. When PM Modi took the charge of India, he did a major shift in foreign policy. One of the objectives was to highlight the soft power of India; its culture, tradition, yoga, aesthetics to name a few (Malhotra, 2015). The second was the focus on right-wing policies with strict propagation of its anti-terrorism initiatives not just in the country but in the Asia-Pacific region as well. At BRICS, India is competing with others but cooperating with BRICS countries. However, it is attempting to dominate and persuade with its soft power. India’s rising MNCs are engaging in Outward FDI with ownership transfer, the way China is been doing for the last two decades. With western countries, particularly G7 countries announcing B3W targeting China, Chinese MNCs will surely face the burn while Indian MNCs will be welcomed (The White House, 2021). Thus, India is not interested in open competition but cooperation.

## **2.4. FUTURE OF BRICS**

The future of any multilateral arrangement between countries is determined based on present cooperation, performance, and dispute settlement mechanism. With respect to cooperation, from the last 12 summits reporting and warmth of BRICS Sherpa meetings, it would be acceptable to suggest good cooperation between BRICS countries. Under the banner of BRICS, cooperation is not just restricted to governments but civil cooperation is also blooming. Educational institutions focusing on BRICS have been established, youth cooperation and events are frequently been organized, BRICS think tanks are geared up, Innovation competitions are being held regularly, all these are indicators of good cooperation among myriad areas (BRICS Civil, 2021). The second is the BRICS performance, with the establishment of the New Development Bank, BRICS has reached a great feat. Before the pandemic, NDB was promoting green channels of development by providing loans to environmentally friendly projects. However, the role of NDB was not much in the pandemic as it failed to sponsor or support vaccine/medical activities. In addition to this, BRICS has not yet ratified a formal agreement with a guiding principles document. This makes the objective of BRICS ambiguous and skeptics believe it may collapse anytime, which will not be surprising as it was established spontaneously. India is looking forward to solving both problems by building a more formal structure for the BRICS. In the post-pandemic world, India will be using the BRICS as a global PR platform. Considering the rapid economic growth of India, it is clear that BRICS will be benefitted from that and BRICS will provide a great opportunity for the civil society and business community to cooperate and collaborate. Thus, the future of BRICS requires improvement in performance indicators and sound institutions while there is hope for people-centric activities to be vibrant in BRICS countries.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

The upcoming BRICS meet will be interesting due to the issues generated in the last two years such as a pandemic, border clash between India and China, and the Digital transformation of economies. Being developing countries, India and China share the same vision of reforming the world order and for that, there is a need to collaborate and cooperate. India is willing to cooperate in the area of digital capabilities, climate change, trade, and investment facilitation. However, in other areas, there are competing interests such as border disputes, China’s CPEC program, and so on. Still, diplomatic relations between India and China can improve in the upcoming BRICS meetings with India chairing the 13<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None.

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