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Research Article

BRICS in Transition: India's Strategic Calculus in a Changing Global Order

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses India's strategic engagement in the BRICS over the past decade. During this period, the global power structure has undergone significant reconfiguration, characterized by a transition toward multipolarity, heightened multilateral frictions, and intensified strategic competition among major powers. The central argument of the paper is that India's engagement with BRICS has shifted from a predominantly peripheral and development-oriented approach, focused on economic cooperation and South-South solidarity, to a more deliberate and multifaceted strategic calculus. This evolution seeks to enhance India's geopolitical footprint, promote multipolarity, advance institutional reforms in global governance, and safeguard strategic autonomy amid an increasingly contested international order. India strategic calculus of the BRICS aims at establishing its presence in a world increasingly multipolar, and also towards managing the power asymmetry.

The strategic calculus that India has vis-a-vis BRICS is to assert its role in a world that is becoming multipolar and manage power asymmetries. It practices a balancing act in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific by using BRICS as a diplomatic field and retaliation to enforce the interests of the Global South. One of the parts of the Indian economic diplomacy is multi-dimensional trade, investment, and financial institutions, such as the New Development Bank. At the same time, India has assumed a restrained proactive move towards de-dollarisation of some of its transactions hence strengthening strong supply chains and incorporating some other economies in global value chain through practical and diversified alliances. The paper outlines four key thematic arenas, which are geopolitical positioning, economic cooperation, institutional reform, and normative diplomacy, highlighting the critical issues, including the presence of China in BRICS, and the internal heterogeneity of member interests. The paper is concluded by argument that the BRICS approach by India is not only a continuation of its multilateralism over the years, but also a novel way of seeking autonomy in its strategy in an international system that is full of contours.

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only the extension of its centuries-old approach to multilateralism, but also a new way of strategic independence in the international system full of changing contours.

KEYWORDS: BRICS, India, global governance, multipolarity, strategic autonomy, global order, international institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The foreign policy of India in the twentieth century has been defined by self-calibrations aimed at manoeuvring through an international system that is changing at an alarming rate. One such recalibration would be the increasing involvement of India in the BRICS bloc, a grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa that was formally formed in 2009 to promote cooperation amongst the emerging economies. Born as an economic dialogue arena, BRICS has over the years since then become an important platform of strategic significance that covers the gamut of challenges including development finance to overhaul of world governance systems (Armijo, 2007; Roy, 2012). The experience of India with BRICS has changed significantly responding to the geopolitical turbulence in the world, a more assertive China, the declining United States hegemony, and divergent perspectives of a changed world governance system. It was the period when India was moving on complicated strategic grounds, and it was cooperating with China and Russia, as well as trying to develop relations with the other great democracies. These dynamics provoke such significant questions such as how has India re-calculated its strategic calculus in the BRICS framework? How far has BRICS been used to address the larger foreign-policy interests of India? And what does India see BRICS playing in the establishment of a multipolar world order?

The paper attempts to answer these queries by analytically looking at the BRICS involvement in India, and is based on empirical findings through policy statements, official communique and scholarly discussions. It argues that the strategic activity of BRICS of the years 2014-2023 is continuity and an innovation; continuity in its multilateralism and South-South cooperation, and innovation in using BRICS as a platform of normative agendas, institutional reform, and geopolitical balancing. The BRICS was a conceptual formation of fast emerging economies in the early 2000s whose potential as a force was able to challenge the status-quo of the world dominated by the Western powers (O'Neill, 2001). India, together with China and other emerging states, wanted a platform, which would help to increase its voice on vital matters associated with global economic governance, reform of international financial institutions and development cooperation. Having already expanded its agenda with the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2014, BRICS, since its first summit in 2009, points to a direction of increased institutionalization (Cooper, 2016). The initial participation of India in BRICS was mainly economically motivated, that is, diversification of the market, to attract investment, and to promote developmental cooperation. Nonetheless, with the shift in the global power relations in the 2010s, which is characterized by the rise of China as a geopolitical rivalry and the further fragmentation of international norms, the Indian involvement developed into the form that also factored in the strategic and normative issues into its preferential calculus.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature about BRICS is complex as it presents conflicting definitions of the group and its direction. Three

general threads come out of the literature: institutionalist views, critical geopolitical readings and normative-constructivist readings. Institutionalists focus on BRICS as an institutional experimentation and policy coordination space between emerging economies, with the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) as practical examples of institutional failure identified in line with the perceived inadequacies of current financial institutions (Cooper, 2016; Chin and Jayadeva, 2020). In general, such works tend to predict developmental and economic co-operation, infrastructure funding, as well as a system where development can avoid the west dominated institutions.

A second thread preempts the geopolitical dynamics of power in the BRICS, putting special emphasis on the China-India relationship. According to scholars in this school, BRICS is a partnership and competition phenomenon, based on the assumption that India is challenged strategically by the dominance of economic weight of China in the agenda of the grouping (Kirton, 2018; Saran, 2020). This literature highlights the existence of power asymmetries and differing interests of strategy, which complicate joint decision-making.

Finally, normative and constructivist scholars interpret BRICS as one of the locations of conflict between the global governance norms and identity formation. According to this view, BRICS are expressing alternative forms of global governance based on multipolarity, sovereign equality and South-South cooperation (Chin and Jayadeva, 2020; Hopewell, 2016). In this context, the Indian participation is not only viewed as a tactical collaboration but also as an attempt to make the world a more inclusive place.

Although all of the strands may be deemed insightful, recent literature tends to paint BRICS as a fixed structure or places too much emphasis on the economic collaboration. It is necessary to have a concerted examination that puts the new strategic calculus of India in the context of global changes and internal group processes- something that this paper takes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper utilizes qualitative and interpretive approach based on document analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Primary sources include BRICS summit statements, official speeches of Indian policymakers, and policy-making reports of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Research Papers, articles, reports of think tanks, and academic monographs dealing with BRICS, Indian foreign policy, and global governance are considered secondary sources. Critical discourse analysis supports the deconstructing of the narratives of strategic intentions, normative commitments, and power in policy discourse texts and in public utterances. The research also triangulates empirical research findings of various sources to strengthen their studies.

Geopolitical Positioning and Strategic Autonomy

The participation of the BRICS grouping in India has been strongly influenced by its long-standing foreign policy of strategic autonomy which has been the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy. Strategic autonomy means the attempt of India to have independent decision-making in the international affairs but not to be too close to any one bloc of the great-powers. The concept was prominent in influencing the Indian strategy towards BRICS, as the country has determined its involvement in bilateral relations with other member states and at the same time maintained its sovereign agency. In this respect, BRICS has been an influential instrument with which India can be able to pursue its geopolitical interests as it manages its way in an increasingly polarized international system.

The foreign policy of India at this point of time can be described as the balancing act of cooperation and caution and especially in light of the growing great power rivalry. The introduction of the tensions between the United States and China, the evolution of economic governance at the global scale, as well as the reorganization of strategic alliances all predetermined a complicated geopolitical landscape. In this context, BRICS offered India another platform of multilaterality that enabled it to interact with the emerging powers positively without giving an impression that it was in any particular geopolitical subdivision. The participation of India in BRICS, in particular, its interaction with China, is a matter of particular importance. Despite the fact that India and China belong to a number of multilateral organisations, such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and G20, the bilateral relationship between the two countries has been characterised by intense strategic

mistrust and disputes. However, BRICS has provided an international arena where India and China can discuss economic collaboration, reforms in global governance, and developmental matters without necessarily addressing the bilateral conflicts. This institutional construct enables India to have access to avenues of communication with China and at the same time preserve its greater strategic autonomy (Scott, 2021).

BRICS have always been viewed by the Indian policymakers as a means of advocating the multipolar international order. In the Indian view, a multipolar system will ensure India is not under the influence of one powerful nation and that it has greater bargaining power over new economies in international governance institutions (Pant and Joshi, 2019). BRICS thus conforms to the larger Indian agenda of a world that will be more decentralized in terms of power and that the developing nations have a greater influence in the international norms and institutions. The other aspect of the geopolitical location of India in BRICS is enhancing the strategic relations with other member states especially those in Brazil, Russia, and South Africa. These alliances enable India to multiply its diplomatic and economic affairs more than the conventional western coalitions. Of these relations, one cannot ignore the ties that India has with Russia. Traditionally, these are the areas in which India and Russia have been closely cooperating in defence, energy, and technology. India remained in contact with Russia despite a growing isolation of the country in the international arena in the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine, using multilateral forums like BRICS. This activity indicates that India is trying to keep its relations with long-term partners unaltered and is not going to be involved in geopolitical alliances (Mohan, 2022).

Therefore, the active participation of India in BRICS represents a wider policy approach of geopolitical balancing, which allows New Delhi to interact with several actors in the global arena and retain its policy autonomy at the same time.

Institutional Innovation and Economic Cooperation

Other than geopolitics, the economic aspect of BRICS has been a major factor in the involvement of India in the grouping. The New Development Bank (NDB) is one of the most notable institutional advances in BRICS that occurred in 2014. The NDB was established as a parallel development finance institution which is meant to supplement and in a way compete with the Western dominated financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the case of India, the NDB is a valuable chance to engage in the establishment of new international organizations that will have more interests and priorities of the new economies (Cooper, 2016). India has been an avid user of the NDB as a tool of facilitating domestic development program. Some of the infrastructure and sustainability projects that the bank has funded within India are renewable energy, transportation, and urban development

projects. These projects are in line with the overall development objectives of India, which include increasing the amount of green energy, infrastructure modernisation, and sustainable economic growth. As an example, NDB loans that facilitate renewable energy development in India help in not only transforming the economy of the country but also making the country part of international climate events (NDB, 2021).

The focus on sustainable development funding is an indicator of the larger capacity of BRICS as a site of institutional innovation in the global economic governance. Through developing financial instruments that will work outside of the conventional western institutions, BRICS aims at giving emerging economies more freedom to determine development priorities. In the case of India, being involved in such initiatives helps it to be a powerful interlocutor among developing countries and increase its leverage within the new geography of financial markets. However, there are also some issues of structure in economic cooperation in BRICS. The lack of asymmetry of the economic power amongst the member states, especially pre-eminent role of China is one of the greatest challenges. The Chinese economy is large compared to the economies of the other members of the BRICS and this could impose imbalances in the decision making process and power in the grouping. This imbalance occasionally leads to the question of whether BRICS institutions can be somehow biased to capturing the interests of the Chinese, rather than the interests of all the members.

The other conflict in BRICS is that related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. Although the BRI is an enormous, China-led infrastructure and connectivity project, the Government of India has strongly refused to join as this would raise sovereignty concerns linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. According to the Indian perspective, the interaction with the BRI would create the strategic dependencies and possibly compromise the stability in the region. Consequently, the parallels between parallel institutional structures, i.e., BRICS-initiated programmes and the BRI, have at some point resulted in the difference in priority settings of member states (Kelkar, 2020). Despite these challenges, India still sees BRICS to be an effective platform of promoting economic cooperation, sustainable development and pioneering new ways of multilaterally governing the world.

Global Governance Change and Normative Diplomacy

The second pillar of India BRICS participation is its unrelenting commitment to the reformation of the global governance institutions. India has since independence campaigned systematically to have a more equitable and representative international architecture. With the BRICS structure, India has acquired a potent channel to amplify its motivations and stir up general support of other emerging powers. It has been a consistent

theme of the Indian delegation at the BRICS summits that reforms in the most critical global structures, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, are required. India argues that the institutions continue to reflect the geopolitical contingencies of the post-Second World War era and not the distribution of global power today, wherein the developing nations are grossly underrepresented in the arenas of decision-making that frame the global economy and global security policy (Saran, 2020).

Therefore, Indian diplomatic position in BRICS can be taken as a form of normative diplomacy. In this manner, India is not only aiming at fulfilling the needs of the nation, but also propagating larger values fairness, inclusiveness, and equal development. India emerges as a spokesperson of the Global South by promoting reforms that would increase the representation of emerging economies. Multipolarity, sovereign equality, and mutual benefit are some of the doctrines that the normative architecture that is being advanced by BRICS routinely predicts. These principles echo the long-standing ethos of India on the foreign-policy, its historic non-alignment policy, and South-South collaboration. The promotion of climate justice, equitable digital governance, and fair trade by India is another indication of the initiative to influence the world standards in a manner that will bring benefits to the developing countries (Hopewell, 2016). However, the effectiveness of BRICS as a normative diplomacy vehicle is sometimes limited by the ideological diversities of its members. These groupings include democracies (like India, Brazil and South Africa), and more centrally governed ones (like China and Russia). The ideological pluralism is an obstacle to finding a consensus on sensitive issues- especially the digital governance, trade regulation as well as economic protectionism. In that regard, whereas BRICS members are usually linked to a more realistic view of a more balanced international order, national interests do not necessarily work in harmony.

Regional Balancing and Strategic Partnering

The participation of India in BRICS too needs to be placed in the bigger context of its multi-alignment policy. Between 2014 and 2023, India also increased its participation in a range of other multilateral and strategic forums: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), ASEAN-based relations, and the Group of Twenty (G20). The restoration and strengthening of the Quad, that is, India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, is an indication of the increasing concerns of India about the increasing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific theatre. In this platform, India is trying to promulgate a rule of law regional order, maritime security cooperation, and technological connectivity amongst democratically oriented partners (Saran, 2020). India seems to be poor in participation in both BRICS and the Quad at first glance, as there are certain strategic tensions between China and the members of the Quad which is more Western-oriented.

As a matter of fact, though, such interactions are heartening examples of the multi-vector diplomacy taken up by India in a calculated way. India does not wish to swing on the two sides of international politics but to maximize its strategic flexibility by maintaining relationships with various international alliances. BRICS would provide an alliance in collaboration with new powers and in driving global governance reforms and the Quad would increase the security alliances of India in the Indo-Pacific region. This level of diplomacy allows India to buffer the geopolitical unpredictability and expands its influence in a wide range of institutional levels. Through its simultaneous active participation in BRICS, Quad, ASEAN discussions and the G20, India can be seen to have an advanced foreign-policy calculus, which is a combination of engagement, balancing, and strategic autonomy.

The BRICS participation of India over the 2014–2023 period is a complex combination of the geopolitical, economic, and normative aspects. The consortium provides India with a platform through which it can further its imagined multipolar global order, institutional innovation in the global economic order and strengthen its relations with other emerging powers. At the same time, the role of India is carefully balanced, in order to ensure the protection of strategic independence and alleviate the tension with China. In spite of asymmetries and ideological discrepancies internally, BRICS continues to be an effective tool in the extensive diplomatic arsenal of India. Through such utilisation, coupled with other global co-operations, India continues to seek a dynamic, multi-aligned foreign-policy paradigm, which aims to ensure that it is making the most out of its influence in an increasingly fractured international environment (Pant and Joshi, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The strategic calculus of India in BRICS both takes the form of continuity and evolution. There is continuity in how it has consistently maintained multilateralism, South-South cooperation and reform of world governance. One can note the evolution in the use of BRICS as a geopolitical positioning tool, normative articulation and institutional innovation in India. In 2014–2023, India was in complex geopolitical maneuvers, as it can collaborate with China but expands strategic reach to other places. Its interaction with the economic processes like the NDB and multilateral normative programs on global governance reformation presents an advanced concept of multilateral diplomacy that goes beyond economic collaboration. However, the BRICS presence of India is full of inconsistencies; the pursuit of strategic independence requires it to balance its incompatible interests within the group as well as align its international obligations with regional and global demands. The key issue is to make BRICS more than a loosely coordinated economic block and a more unified forum that is able to develop a fair and fair

global order. The present paper shows that the involvement of India in BRICS during 2014–23 is a planned strategic decision sensitive to the changing world order. By participating in BRICS, India supports its multilateralist views as well as tries to increase its institutional and normative power. Although there are difficulties caused by the asymmetry of the power and inner contradictions, there is a pragmatic cooperation-competition balance in India. In the future, BRICS will continue to stand out as a significant component in the Indian foreign policy, depending on how it will adjust to new geopolitical conditions and institutional changes to increase the effectiveness of the collective.

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