

Doing It The BRICS Way

The 20th anniversary of BRICS marks a transitional phase, as it contends with challenges — both internal and external. BRICS must remain focused on its strategic mission, strengthening coordination within its membership



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The BRICS Foreign Ministers meeting last week in New Delhi could not have come at a more delicate moment. The 20th anniversary could have marked its transition to a new phase of growth, development, and reformed global governance. But it had to contend with challenges, both internal and external.

The Iran War

It is a complicated neighbourhood. [The war in Iran was an unfortunate development](#) that cast a shadow over the BRICS agenda. While Iran sought condemnation of the Israel-US attack, the Gulf States (which are also members of BRICS) were upset with Iran's retaliation on their assets.

For other members and the region at large, the economic fallout of the war and the subsequent blockade in the Strait of Hormuz, initially by Iran and then by the US, had a devastating impact on supply chains, energy security, food security, and the livelihood of people. In the supercharged atmosphere, where posturing and signalling were important to both sides, consensus was elusive. The Iran war may have got in the way of a joint statement, but [BRICS did well to craft a chair's statement on the meeting's outcomes](#).

There must be lessons to be learned from this experience.

Firstly, although Iran and the UAE felt compelled to force their agenda onto the group, it was clear that there were belligerents outside the BRICS group — that the mediation process had not achieved the desired outcomes, and that it was unlikely any document at the BRICS meeting would change that reality.

Secondly, there was a mismatch of expectations and ground reality. Vested interests recalled that the recent meeting of Deputy Ministers for the Middle East had not reached a consensus, suggesting that the BRICS was in distress.

In the real world, however, not reaching consensus is also an outcome that provides an understanding of differences to be bridged.

Thirdly, the BRICS custom had been to not bring up bilateral issues that may impinge on the group's agenda and dynamics. It may be recalled that India had faced Chinese aggression in 2020 in Galwan and elsewhere, but preferred to engage bilaterally rather than make it an issue for BRICS.

Fourthly, given the trend of geopolitics and prolonged conflicts, it is time for BRICS (the five founding members of which are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to look beyond political-security consultations to build mechanisms for crisis and conflict management. Caution is necessary, but only BRICS can explore alternative ways that reaffirm the primacy of diplomacy over the use of force — of restraint and de-escalation, of tolerance and consensus, and of solutions based on inclusivity, mutual respect and sovereignty.

Geopolitical-Geoeconomic Reset

The ongoing geopolitical flux has caused uncertainty about the international-rules-based order and the future of global governance. Conflicts are normalised to assert power and maintain dominance. The unilateral use of force and weaponisation of political and economic leverage make more urgent the need to abide by norms that provide mutually beneficial exchanges in a globalised world.

Further, such trends disrupt the trajectory of emerging powers seeking national growth, empowerment of citizens, stability in national security, and due representation in the global order. BRICS has been at the forefront of advancing the aspirations of emerging powers.

Its success drew the attention of developing countries, and the door was kept open for their participation.

In such troubled times, India did well to hold the rudder firmly on the strategic mission of BRICS while also developing the capacity to address new challenges in geopolitics and geoeconomics.

So, while there are dark clouds not only over the horizon but also above us, there is yet room for hope on BRICS's progress and its agenda for the future.

BRICS Expansion, Ethos

BRICS has now clarified that it seeks the integration of the new members and partner countries into the BRICS ethos before it embarks on further expansion. This should signal that [BRICS is not an alliance-building entity](#). Efforts should be made to counter the narrative that BRICS was becoming anti-West and sought de-dollarisation.

It would be wise for BRICS to reiterate that it was never directed against any country or group.

The best option would be to reach out to members of the G7 to strengthen bridges with the developed world and multilateral institutions, which was part of the original BRICS agenda. This would hold particular value at a time when the G20 faces uncertainty.

Further, [BRICS has retained focus on practical projects with implementation mechanisms](#) and timelines that support development priorities. Extensive cooperation across sectors as diverse as agriculture, climate, culture, disaster reduction, energy, environment, health, ICT, industry, finance, labour, science and technology, trade, transport, tourism, and youth affairs, among others, confirms the vibrancy and viability of the BRICS vision.

The progress in trade facilitation, trade, and project finance in local currencies, efficient financial settlement, development of Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), and the spread of digital physical infrastructure are among the notable achievements.

The Way Forward

BRICS can expand New Development Bank (NDB) activities for outreach to the private sector and civil society, activate the Grain Exchange and Food Security Reserve, build capacity for renewable energy, consider new mechanisms for climate finance, energy security, and disaster-resilient infrastructure, along with the establishment of a BRICS AI Centre.

Lastly, BRICS has provided diplomatic and economic space to emerging economies and powers, contributing to a better understanding of the need for reform in global governance. Yet, it has fallen short of tangible progress as those in power are reluctant to share.

BRICS has raised hope among developing countries for a fair, inclusive, and representative global order, recognising multipolarity and multilateral approaches. Major reforms are yet to take off in the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the Bretton Woods institutions.

But the winds of change are rising.

The BRICS Way

The resilience of BRICS to chart a course amid geopolitical and geoeconomic transitions is evident in the expansion of its agenda, its pragmatic projects that deliver benefits, and the popularity of its mission and outcomes. It attracts more countries to the BRICS way.

BRICS must remain focused on its strategic mission. It must strengthen coordination within its membership, build bridges with the developed world, and navigate negative narratives. As a 21st-century group, BRICS must retain an approach that is nimble, dynamic, and savvy, as it pursues national development, national security, and reform in global governance.

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