

THE PODIUM AND THE PRODUCT

By Ananya Sahu, Senior Fellow Intern, Centre For Indian Foreign Policy

Indosphere Foundation for World Affairs (IFWA)

On 12 September, leaders and representatives from countries accounting for 49.5 per cent of the world's population, 40 per cent of global GDP and 26 per cent of global trade¹ stood shoulder to shoulder at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi for the famous BRICS “family photograph”. By Saturday evening, the bloc had also agreed unanimously on a 140-paragraph New Delhi Declaration, despite Iran and the UAE sitting on the opposite sides of a live conflict. Now this may sound like routine practice for any high-profile summit, but it is not always the case. Just four months earlier, in May 2026, the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting had failed to produce a joint communiqué² and had to settle for a chair's summary instead. For a grouping whose functioning depends so heavily on consensus, this is worth taking seriously.

But as we celebrate consensus, there is one more question worth asking. Once the photo op is over and the camera leaves, what does this consensus actually mean outside the summit venue? A declaration is evidence that 11 member countries *can* build consensus and agree on certain issues but it says little in itself about how that consensus can translate into something another country can actually use. This gap between what is agreed in the room and what India can actually deliver outside is essentially where India's Global South strategy faces its next test.

New Delhi does not necessarily need to lead the Global South in terms of being a bloc hegemon. The argument here is that New Delhi has to become capable enough, reliable enough, trusted enough and useful enough that countries have a practical reason to keep coming back and choosing it. And India is not starting from scratch. India has many capabilities that can make this possible. For instance, New Delhi has already established itself as a first responder and net

¹ PIB. (2026, September 10). *BRICS : Evolution, Cooperation and India's Leadership*. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?>

² The Hindu. (2026, May 15). *BRICS ministers fail to issue a joint statement over differences on West Asia conflict*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/brics-ministers-fail-to-issue-a-joint-statement-over-differences-on-west-asia-conflict/article70982709.ece>

security provider³ in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and the country has also made significant progress in Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), pharmaceuticals and developmental partnerships, alongside gaining real diplomatic weight. The question is whether these capabilities can translate into more durable influence.

One such example is Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Over the past decade, India has built systems for digital identity, digital payments, data exchange and service delivery⁴ and has increasingly offered elements of this experience abroad under the India Stack framework as part of its broader DPI diplomacy. As noted by Minister of State for External Affairs Shri Kirti Vardhan Singh in a recent parliamentary reply, 24 countries⁵ have signed MoUs with India on DPI. India's open-source MOSIP identity platform has found particular uptake in Africa, while UPI has expanded to countries including Mauritius, Singapore, the UAE and France among others. But the essence does not lie simply in India securing another MoU. It lies in governments choosing to incorporate Indian-origin digital solutions into their own infrastructure. DPI-based projects funded by the Government of India are already being implemented in countries including Myanmar, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Guyana. That creates a relationship and an impact that lasts beyond a summit.

Or take the example of the Indian pharmaceutical industry. India is recognised as the “Pharmacy of the world”⁶ and supplies roughly one in five generic medicines globally and is third in global export volume, with exports reaching \$30.5 billion in FY 2025. It is important to understand that for many developing countries with no drug industry of their own, access to affordable medicines cannot be taken for granted. This gives New Delhi an existing capability which it can use to create more sustainable and deeper partnerships in the Global South. The author does not intend to argue that just because India supplies medicines it has influence. The argument rather is that India has yet another point of engagement it can build on .

³ PIB Delhi. (2022, November 29). *India has emerged as a net security provider in Indo-Pacific, says Raksha Mantri at multi-agency HADR exercise 'Samanvay 2022' in Agra*. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1879788®=48&lang=2>

⁴ Digital India. (n.d.). *India has signed MoU / agreements with 23 countries for cooperation on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)*. https://www.digitalindia.gov.in/press_release/india-has-signed-mou-agreements-with-23-countries-for-cooperation-on-digital-public-infrastructure-dpi/

⁵ MEA. (2026, August 7). *Question No- 3291 International Cooperation On Digital Public Infrastructure*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/41643>

⁶ IBEF. (2026, May). *Indian pharmaceuticals industry analysis*. India Brand Equity Foundation. <https://www.ibef.org/industry/indian-pharmaceuticals-industry-analysis-presentation>

None of these successes should be exaggerated or interpreted as India winning outright. Upon closer examination, India has built real developmental and economic relationships across the Global South, but its financial footprint remains much smaller than China's. If India wants to ensure that its diplomatic wins translate into longer-lasting relationships, it should find ways of using its existing strengths more effectively. One small experiment points in this direction. In October 2025, the Reserve Bank of India amended its regulations to allow authorised dealer banks to lend in Indian rupees to residents of Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka⁷, including banks in these countries, for cross-border trade transactions. It is too early to call this a new model of international finance and it would be inaccurate to simply describe it as an attempt at de-dollarisation. India's approach is better understood in terms of de-risking rather than replacing the dollar. RBI's move shows that India is trying to make its own financial system more useful to its neighbours.

Of course, this does not mean that India's diplomatic and convening role is unimportant. India has never claimed that the Global South needs a new hegemon and its approach has emphasised partnership and giving developing countries a greater voice in global institutions. India's role in bringing the African Union into the G20⁸ was without a doubt a diplomatic achievement because it helped give the continent a permanent voice in an important forum of global economic governance. The Voice of Global South Summits have also given developing countries a platform to raise concerns that may otherwise receive less attention in traditional global forums. The point is simply that diplomatic credibility needs to be backed by capabilities that countries can actually use. India does not have to choose between the podium and the product. It needs both, which is why the relationship between the two was never really an either-or situation. They have always been complementary to each other.

⁷ RBI. (2025). *Foreign Exchange Management (Borrowing and Lending) (Amendment) Regulations, 2025* (FEMA 3(R)(4)/2025-RB). Reserve Bank Of India.
[https://rbidocs.rbi.org.in/rdocs/notification/PDFs/FEMA3\(R\)06102025F10F8B8EE9B1E43178BB46F3DE22060F8.PDF](https://rbidocs.rbi.org.in/rdocs/notification/PDFs/FEMA3(R)06102025F10F8B8EE9B1E43178BB46F3DE22060F8.PDF)

⁸ MEA. (2023, December 14). *Question No-1348 India's Initiative In Making AU A Permanent Member Of G20*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha?dtl/37414/QUESTION_NO1348_INDIA'S_INITIATIVE_IN_MAKING_AU_A_PERMANENT_MEMBER_OF_G20