

India at BRICS 2026: Strategic Autonomy and Global Governance

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INTRODUCTION

The 18th BRICS Summit was held in New Delhi on 12 and 13 September 2026 under India's chairship. The summit was conducted under the theme “**Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability**”, reflecting India's emphasis on development, sustainability, innovation and people-centred cooperation. The summit also marked two decades of BRICS cooperation and brought together the expanded membership of the grouping. BRICS now comprises eleven members—Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates—which collectively account for approximately 49.5 percent of the global population, 40 percent of global GDP and 26 percent of global trade (BRICS, 2026). India's fourth chairship of BRICS is significant because the grouping has include issues of global governance, development, finance, technology, trade, sustainability and international security. India attempted to use its chairship to connect these broader issues with the concerns of developing countries and the Global South. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while chairing the BRICS session on inclusive global governance, emphasised the need for greater representation of developing countries in global decision-making institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council (MEA, 2026).

The summit was also important for India's wider foreign-policy objectives. The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the summit provided a multilateral setting for continued engagement between the two countries. Their discussions included border peace, the boundary question, trade imbalance, supply chains and greater cooperation on regional and global issues (PIB, 2026). Against this background, the central question is whether and how India's 2026 BRICS chairship sought to leverage the grouping as a platform for strategic autonomy, greater representation of the Global South in global governance, and practical, issue-based cooperation on shared challenges. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the ability of BRICS members with different geopolitical and economic interests to maintain consensus and translate declarations into practical outcomes.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

BRICS originated as BRIC, bringing together Brazil, Russia, India and China. The first meeting of BRIC foreign ministers took place on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in 2006, while the first BRIC Summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009 (BRICS, 2026). South Africa subsequently joined the grouping, transforming BRIC into BRICS. The grouping has since expanded significantly, with Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates joining as full members in 2024 and Indonesia joining in 2025 (BRICS, 2026). The expansion has changed the character of BRICS. It now represents a geographically diverse group of major emerging economies and developing countries. Its agenda extends across three broad areas: political and security cooperation; economic and financial cooperation; and cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Over time, cooperation has also expanded to areas such as climate change, food and energy security, science and technology, health, transport and digital development (BRICS, 2026). India's 2026 chairship therefore took place within an increasingly broad and diverse institutional framework. India's chairship sought to address the challenges concerning the world through a practical and development-oriented agenda. The Indian government stated that more than 350 meetings were organised during the chairship across nearly 30 Indian cities. Ministerial and working-level meetings covered sectors including science and technology, transport, tourism and other areas of cooperation (BRICS, 2026).

MAIN ARGUMENT AND ANALYSIS

India's 2026 BRICS chairship can be understood as an attempt to use the grouping as a platform for advancing three interconnected objectives: strategic autonomy, greater representation of the Global South in global governance, and practical cooperation on emerging economic and security challenges. The New Delhi Declaration provides evidence of this approach by emphasising dialogue, diplomacy, peaceful settlement of disputes, stronger multilateralism and respect for international law (PIB, 2026). For India, this is significant because reform of global governance has been an important component of its foreign-policy agenda. BRICS provides India with a collective platform through which it can raise the concerns of emerging economies and developing countries rather than addressing these issues only through bilateral diplomacy.

According to **Wani (2026)** the Declaration's emphasis on terrorism is particularly relevant to India. The BRICS leaders condemned the 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack and reiterated their opposition to terrorism in all its forms. They also highlighted the need to address terrorism, terrorist financing and safe havens while stressing that terrorism should not be associated with any particular religion, nationality or civilisation. This provides India with an important diplomatic platform for maintaining international attention on cross-border terrorism and for advocating consistent standards in counter-terrorism cooperation. Another important dimension of the summit was its approach to global governance reform. The Declaration supported greater representation of developing countries in international institutions and backed reform of the United Nations Security Council (PIB, 2026). It also noted the support of China and Russia for the aspirations of India and Brazil to play a greater role in the United Nations, including the Security Council. BRICS can therefore function as a platform through which India seeks to build wider support for reform of existing global institutions. **Singh (2026)** further provides that BRICS forms one component of India's broader multi-platform foreign policy and India does not have to treat participation in BRICS and engagement with Western countries as mutually exclusive choices. Instead, the grouping provides additional diplomatic space for India to engage with different centres of power while protecting its policy autonomy. The participation of Chinese President Xi Jinping in New Delhi created an opportunity for high-level bilateral engagement on the margins of BRICS (Singh, 2026).

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

India's chairship advanced discussions on reforming the international financial architecture, including IMF and World Bank governance. The declaration also records India's leadership in progressing the BRICS Strategy for Economic Partnership 2030 (MEA, 2026). India can use BRICS to push for greater representation of emerging economies in institutions whose governance structures were largely established under an earlier global economic order. The chairship produced discussions on cross-border payments, local-currency settlements, the New Investment Platform and India's proposed BRICS Risk Lab at GIFT City IFSC. (MEA, 2026). These initiatives could create additional channels for Indian businesses, investors and financial institutions to engage with BRICS economies, although their practical impact will depend on implementation and member-country participation.

The summit also placed considerable emphasis on digitalisation, AI, smart grids, Industry 4.0 and start-ups. The declaration welcomes the BRICS Incubator Network, discusses a possible BRICS Startup Innovation Fund, and recognises the establishment of the India Centre for BRICS Industrial Competencies (MEA, 2026). This creates opportunities for India to promote its technology and innovation ecosystem while obtaining access to cooperation, knowledge-sharing and markets across BRICS. The declaration recognises cooperation in renewable energy, nuclear energy, hydrogen, energy storage, smart grids and other technologies while maintaining that countries may pursue diversified energy mixes according to their national circumstances. For India, BRICS can serve as a platform for balancing energy security with energy transition, particularly through technological cooperation, investment and resilient energy infrastructure. The declaration describes the participation of emerging markets and developing countries as an important part of BRICS cooperation (MEA, 2026). This expands India's diplomatic outreach beyond the formal BRICS membership and creates additional avenues for engagement with countries of the Global South.

CONCLUSION

India's 2026 BRICS chairship demonstrates how the grouping can be used as a platform for advancing multiple dimensions of Indian foreign policy. The summit also provided opportunities for engagement with China and other major BRICS members on bilateral, regional and global issues. At the same time, the significance of India's chairship should not be assessed only through the adoption of the New Delhi Declaration. BRICS remains a diverse grouping in which member states have different strategic and economic interests. Its future effectiveness will therefore depend on its ability to transform political consensus into sustained institutional and sectoral cooperation. Thus, the central significance of India's 2026 BRICS chairship lies in its attempt to connect strategic autonomy with Global South diplomacy and practical multilateral cooperation.

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