

Explained: BRICS Plus at Bharat Mandapam: Widening the Club or Diluting It?

By Shalini, Research Associate Intern, Center For Indian Foreign Policy

Indosphere Foundation For World Affairs (IFWA)

What happened?

The 18th BRICS Summit was held at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, on 12–13 September 2026. On 12 September, BRICS leaders met in a closed session and adopted the New Delhi Declaration. On 13 September, the second and final day, the summit opened up into the Outreach/BRICS Plus Dialogue, bringing partner countries and heads of regional organisations invited by India into direct dialogue with BRICS leaders (ThePrint, 2026). Although adopted a day earlier, the Declaration formally commended India for hosting this Outreach/BRICS Plus segment, describing it as an initiative that "injects new impetus to strengthen international cooperation and solidarity" (BRICS, 2026).

Why it matters?

BRICS Plus represents the bloc's attempt to position itself as an organising platform for the wider Global South, rather than a grouping limited to its own members. How India handled this outreach, as summit host and BRICS Chair for 2026, signals whether the grouping is maturing into a genuinely representative multilateral forum, or whether rapid expansion is beginning to blur its identity and make its decision-making more complex.

Background

BRICS Plus dialogues are not new. China introduced the "BRICS Plus" format at the 2017 Xiamen Summit, inviting Egypt, Guinea, Mexico, Tajikistan and Thailand to a Dialogue of Emerging Market and Developing Countries (ECNS, 2017). At a similar BRICS-Africa Outreach

and BRICS Plus Dialogue in Johannesburg in 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for BRICS to be "the voice of the Global South" (Press Information Bureau, 2023).

What has changed by 2026 is scale. BRICS began as Brazil, Russia, India and China, gained South Africa in 2010, expanded in January 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, and was joined by Indonesia in January 2025 (BRICS India 2026, n.d.; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Saudi Arabia was also invited in 2023 to become a full member from 1 January 2024 (BRICS Information Centre, 2023), but it has never publicly confirmed its accession. Official BRICS and Indian government sources therefore list eleven members, while Saudi Arabia's own statements have described it both as a "BRICS member country" and as an "invited country" on consecutive days during the May 2026 Foreign Ministers' Meeting (Reuters, 2025; Saudi Press Agency, 2026a, 2026b). This explainer therefore treats ten states as confirmed members and Saudi Arabia as a disputed eleventh.

Alongside them, a new Partner country category created at the 2024 Kazan Summit brought in Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda and Uzbekistan in January 2025 (Brasil de Fato, 2025), followed by Vietnam in June 2025 (All India Radio, 2025). That makes ten Partner countries in all, none of them full members. The 140-paragraph New Delhi Declaration was adopted by consensus among BRICS members (BRICS, 2026; The Wire, 2026).

What are the implications?

Supporters frame this expansion as BRICS finally matching its stated ambition of representing Emerging Markets and Developing Countries (EMDCs). The New Delhi Declaration explicitly recognises "the valuable contribution of Partner countries to BRICS cooperation" and says that deeper partnership with EMDCs will strengthen solidarity and international cooperation (BRICS, 2026). For India specifically, hosting the Outreach segment let it showcase leadership of the Global South without appearing to lead an anti-Western bloc, a useful position given its simultaneous Quad membership and ties with Washington.

But a larger and more varied membership also makes consensus harder to reach. The BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM) held at Bharat Mandapam on 14–15 May 2026 shows how. Instead of a joint statement, India as Chair issued a Chair's Statement and Outcome Document,

which acknowledged "differing views among some members" on the West Asia situation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2026), amid sharp exchanges between the Iranian and UAE delegations (The Wire, 2026). Leaders did reach consensus on the New Delhi Declaration in September, but only after protracted negotiations over the war in the region (The Wire, 2026). There is also a risk that BRICS Plus becomes a talk-shop of symbolic outreach rather than a vehicle for concrete cooperation, especially if larger economies within the bloc dominate agenda-setting while newer partner countries remain observers rather than equal stakeholders.

What next?

It will be worth watching whether any of the ten Partner countries are elevated to full membership, since BRICS relies on consensus-based decision-making (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025)". Equally important is whether India's successor as BRICS Chair continues this outreach emphasis or scales it back. China takes over the Chairship in 2027 and is due to host the next Foreign Ministers' meeting on the margins of the 81st UN General Assembly (Ministry of External Affairs, 2026). Finally, the BRICS Plus format will be judged on whether it produces measurable outcomes, such as trade deals, technology transfers, or joint positions, beyond the diplomatic optics of the New Delhi gathering.

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