Guest Column

Going Beyond BRICS: Fulfilling the Promise of India-China Relations

By Chris Ogden



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Many analysts have heralded the recent BRICS Summit in New Delhi as a chance for **a reset of India-China relations**. With shared strategic aims, such as ensuring common development, promoting a more multipolar world, contributing to global peace and stability, and becoming great powers, the potential synergies are clearly palpable. As such, observers argue that ties between New Delhi and Beijing have a "**long-term significance for the future of Asia and the global order**." Echoing these sentiments, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that China now approaches relations with India from a "**strategic and long-term perspective**." In turn, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi argued that India and China cooperation will be for the "**welfare of the entire humanity**."

The BRICS Platform

Although **avoiding any statements** concerning BRICS members involved in continued conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and in the Middle East between the US and Iran, the growing positional strength of the 11-member bloc remains undimmed. After **a recent expansion**, the grouping represents "**50% of the world's population, 40% of global GDP and more than 25% of global trade**." Its members are unified by a shared aim to build an alternative to a Western-led multilateralism they regarded as unrepresentative and outdated. The Summit's theme, **Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability**, underscores the group's ambition to carve out a new strategic space of its own.

The New Delhi Declaration, issued at the 2026 BRICS Summit, also raised concerns over **unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures** from the US that have affected BRICS members such as Brazil, India and China. Such measures negatively reduce the bloc's economic growth, which has been striking: BRICS output has **increased nearly 4.5 times in recent years, against a 2.5-fold rise in global GDP**. It is precisely this momentum that US tariff measures threaten to slow. Speculation about a **BRICS currency - the R5 or "UNIT" - and a payment system (BRICS Pay)**, although more muted, continues to underpin such

narratives. Both act as financial alternatives that could potentially **undermine the primacy of the US dollar**, and thus weaken the financial hegemony of the US.

During the Summit, Modi also actively sought to underline BRICS's capacity to translate its growing material prowess into direct influence upon the prevailing nature of global politics, arguing that "**BRICS had reached a 'coming of age' moment and called on the Global South to become a 'rule-shaper' rather than simply accept rules set elsewhere**." This view echoes a common BRICS commitment to "**strengthening multilateralism and multipolarity**." Notably, Modi called for greater "equity and justice" for the Global South. Criticising the historical domination of Western institutions, he declared that "**we have to transform this pyramid of privilege into a platform of partnership**."

Asia's Objective Giants

With world-leading GDPs, populations, landmasses and military spending, **the similarities but also complementarities between China and India are self-evident**. Apart from making them the pre-eminent entities within the Asia sphere and the Indo-Pacific Century, the two countries present prospects for mutual expansion and reinforcement. For these reasons, Xi labelled China and India as "**partners rather than rivals, and development opportunities rather than threats to each other**." Mirroring this outlook, Modi additionally stated that "**differences should not become disputes. Both sides must be guided by three mutuals: mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest**." Such openness of narratives is not to gloss over the many tensions that have the potential to derail India-China relations. These include trade imbalances, supply chain issues and market access concerns, as well as border disputes and the aftermath of the **2020 Galwan Valley clash**, in which twenty Indian and four Chinese soldiers were killed. China's **support for Pakistan, and differences within BRICS concerning membership expansion, the role of the New Development Bank and BRICS Pay**, could compound these frictions. Alliance-avoidant New Delhi also remains vigilant in its efforts to stop the BRICS from becoming "**a Chinese bandwagon or an explicitly anti-Western coalition**."

As US President Trump's actions **appreciably accelerate the erosion of the current liberal world order and undermine its key pillars**, renewing the India-China partnership has become essential. Mitigating the impact of the instability emanating from Washington, whilst shepherding in their preferred multipolar order, thus requires concerted pragmatism. It is for these reasons that China has said that both sides need an "**objective and rational strategic perception**" as the basis for their bilateral relations. Xi's delegation to India **numbered 400 officials**, double the size during his last visit in 2019.

The importance of an India-China reset reflects a wider view, put by Jeffrey Sachs, that "**China is in no position to run the world, like Britain or the US. We are in a**

world of multiple powers, where India is one". As Beijing recognises this new strategic reality, New Delhi equally needs to remember that, in the words of former Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, "**our DNA is made for non-alignment**." India-China relations and BRICS can "**promote this worldview in a way that is non-western but not explicitly anti-western**." This also means rejecting obsolete questions posed by Western analysts, such as "**in a world long dictated by US hegemony, who leads the other side?**" Such a query makes little sense in a multipolar world, which by its very definition rejects dominance by any single power.

Daring to Go Further

While the public acknowledgement of the need for improved bilateral relations, coupled with meetings between officials to boost trade, diplomatic and multilateral cooperation, are all laudable, bolder steps could be taken. As Xi has noted, both leaders have wanted to guide "**the relationship from a 'fresh start' to a 'new level of advancement**." Given their recent animosities, this is a major achievement but is also, as the Chinese President remarked, "**a situation (that) has not come easily and needs to be cherished." Besides the "unmistakable optics — a clear show of unity … as Xi prepares to visit Washington**," it is thus a moment for achieving a paradigm shift in India-China relations.

Declaring such a shift to the world could involve resolving their longstanding territorial disputes. For India and China, that would mean fast-tracking the Boundary Question talks, **which recently met for the 25th time**, and treating them as the primary catalyst for a genuine transformation of bilateral relations. Significantly in this regard, China has resolved many of its border disputes. For example, Beijing signed agreements with **Laos** and **Bhutan** in the 1990s; with **Russia in 1991, 1994 and 2004**; with **Vietnam in 1999**; and with the Central Asian states. These deals often came about through clear **sovereign compromises by Beijing, for example settling for 20 percent of disputed land with Kazakhstan, 30 percent with Kyrgyzstan and the vast minority with Tajikistan**.

Such a resolution would remove the principal point of tension - and a simmering flashpoint - between the two sides, opening the way for a durable strategic partnership. Whilst it would undoubtedly require reciprocity, consensus and sacrifice, the dispute could be presented as a shared negative colonial legacy holding back Asia, one whose resolution would be pro-autonomy, pro-development and pro-Global South. Military infrastructure in disputed areas could also be reimagined for trade uses. Most importantly, it would send a global signal that China and India can act as responsible great powers and that their actions embody a constructive multipolar future and their leadership of the Indo-Pacific Century.

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