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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

A Bigger BRICS, A Busier India — The Chairship and the Challenge of Leading a Diverse Forum

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India is now BRICS Chair with 10 members including former adversaries and complex partners. How does India lead a forum where China is the dominant economy and Iran is now a member? What does BRICS leadership mean for India's strategic autonomy?"

WHY IN NEWS

EAM S. Jaishankar launched India's BRICS 2026 Chairship logo and website (brics2026.gov.in), marking India's formal assumption of the BRICS presidency from Brazil. India will host the 18th BRICS Summit in 2026 — the first Summit after the group's historic enlargement to 10 members.

FROM FIVE TO TEN — BRICS IS NO LONGER WHAT IT WAS

When Jim O'Neill coined the "BRIC" acronym in 2001, he was describing four large, fast-growing emerging economies with similar macroeconomic trajectories. The implicit assumption was homogeneity of economic condition and aspiration — these were countries that had grown rapidly, were integrating into the global economy, and stood to benefit from a reformed version of the existing international order.

The 2023 Johannesburg enlargement broke that conceptual coherence. The five new members — Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE — share little of the original BRIC countries' economic profile. Saudi Arabia and UAE are wealthy petrostates, not emerging markets. Ethiopia is one of the world's poorest countries. Iran is under Western sanctions. Egypt faces a debt crisis.

What unites the expanded BRICS is not economic similarity but **political common ground**: a shared desire to reduce dependence on Western-dominated financial institutions, a preference for a multipolar world order, and varying degrees of frustration with the US-led rules-based international system.

India is now Chair of this more complex, more ideologically diverse, and more strategically significant forum.

INDIA'S DILEMMA — LEADING WITHOUT BEING LED

India's relationship with BRICS has always been characterised by both opportunity and constraint.

The opportunity: BRICS provides India a platform to advance its Global South narrative — positioning itself as the voice of the developing world in conversations about IMF reform, climate finance, and technology access. India's G20 Presidency (2023) demonstrated how effectively India can use multilateral chairmanships to project its developmental philosophy.

The constraint: China is the dominant power within BRICS by almost every economic metric. China's GDP (~US\$ 18 trillion) dwarfs the combined GDP of the other nine members excluding the USA's equivalent partners. China views BRICS as one of several forums to advance its vision of a Sinocentric international order — and uses it to push narratives that do not always align with India's interests.

The enlargement has amplified this constraint. Most of the new members — particularly Iran, Ethiopia, and Egypt — are in China's economic orbit through BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) financing. Saudi Arabia and UAE, while maintaining hedged relationships with the US, have moved meaningfully closer to China economically.

India's challenge as Chair is to set an agenda that reflects India's priorities without appearing to be a Chinese auxiliary — and without being seen as a Western-friendly saboteur of BRICS unity.

THREE AGENDA PRIORITIES INDIA SHOULD PUSH

1. Institutional infrastructure reform: India should use the Chairship to push for IMF quota reform — increasing the voting share of underrepresented Global South countries — and for reform of the World Bank's lending conditions. This is genuinely India's priority, not just China's, and resonates across all 10 members.

2. Digital public infrastructure (DPI): India's stack — Aadhaar, UPI, ONDC, DigiLocker — is the world's most successful DPI model. India should present the BRICS Chairship as an opportunity to help developing member states (Egypt, Ethiopia) build their own DPI ecosystems under a "South-South" cooperation framework. This differentiates India's contribution from China's hardware-heavy BRI approach.

3. Climate finance and technology transfer: The Paris Agreement's obligation for developed nations to provide US\$ 100 billion/year in climate finance has been consistently unmet. BRICS, representing major vulnerable countries (India, Ethiopia, Egypt), can jointly pressure developed nations for meaningful delivery — a topic where India and China share interests despite their bilateral tensions.

THE IRAN QUESTION

Iran's membership is the most diplomatically awkward element of the enlarged BRICS for India. India has longstanding ties with Iran — the **Chabahar Port** project, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and historical energy imports. But Iran is under US sanctions, and India has had to carefully manage its Iran relationship to avoid US secondary sanctions (CAATSA).

With Iran as a BRICS member, India will have to navigate Iran-related discussions in the same room where it also wants to advance its own global interests. Excluding Iran from BRICS-wide financial cooperation would be politically untenable; including Iran fully risks US pushback.

This is a microcosm of the broader challenge: expanded BRICS forces India to make choices it has historically preferred to defer.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: BRICS members (10); Johannesburg 2023 enlargement; India BRICS Chair 2026; 18th Summit; theme; NDB; CRA (Contingent Reserve Arrangement); brics2026.gov.in; Jim O'Neill 2001; 1st Summit 2009 Yekaterinburg.

Mains GS-2: India's multilateral strategy — BRICS Chairship as diplomatic opportunity; China's dominance within BRICS; Iran membership and CAATSA constraints; India as voice of Global South; India's DPI as soft power in developing world; contrast with G7 worldview.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

BRICS 2026 CHAIRSHIP:

India's Chair; from Brazil (2025 Chair; Kazan 2024 was Russia)
 Theme: Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability
 18th Summit to be hosted by India
 EAM S. Jaishankar launched logo January 13, 2026

BRICS ENLARGEMENT HISTORY:

2001: Jim O'Neill coin BRIC (Goldman Sachs); 2009: first summit Yekaterinburg
 2010: South Africa joins; 2011: first BRICS summit (Sanya, China)
 2023: Johannesburg — 5 new members invited (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE)
 January 1, 2024: new members effective (Argentina declined)

NEW DEVELOPMENT BANK (NDB):

Founded: 2014 (Fortaleza, Brazil); HQ: Shanghai
 Authorised capital: US\$ 100 billion; subscribed: US\$ 50 billion
 First President: K.V. Kamath (India) 2015-2020
 Current President: Dilma Rousseff (Brazil, former President)
 Members: BRICS 5 + Bangladesh, UAE, Uruguay, Egypt

BRICS CRA:

Contingent Reserve Arrangement: US\$ 100 billion liquidity pool
 Function: emergency currency support (similar to IMF SBA)
 China contributes 41%; India and Brazil 18% each

CHABAHAR PORT — INDIA-IRAN:

India developed Shahid Beheshti Port, Chabahar, Iran
 Part of INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor)
 India signed 10-year contract with Iran in 2024 despite US sanctions pressure
 CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act): US law threatening sanctions on Iran trade partners

INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY (2023):

Theme: "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — One Earth, One Family, One Future"
 New Delhi Declaration: adopted by all G20 members including Russia (on Ukraine language)
 African Union admitted as permanent G20 member under India's presidency

Sources: Indian Express, MEA, brics2026.gov.in

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