

# In Spite of the Spite: An Indian View of China and India in BRICS

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## Abstract

Based on expectations drawn from rationalist understanding of international institutions, this article argues that China and India persist with membership and participation in BRICS despite their growing bilateral conflicts because the grouping serves their respective strategic interests. Contrary to accounts portraying BRICS as a model for South–South cooperation or as a forum for socialization of member countries to develop a new shared collective identity, the article highlights the nationalistic power politics angle and explains why BRICS will continue to have both China and India inside the tent. For China, BRICS is one of many multilateral institutions with which to challenge and push back the United States and the Western-crafted liberal international system. For India, BRICS is less of an anti-Western formation and increasingly a soft balancing instrument through which China can be bound to rules and moderate its assertive behaviour as a great power. The article also highlights the constructive role Russia plays in the internal soft balancing of China via BRICS and offers examples of Russia acting as a behind-the-scenes intermediary to massage Sino-Indian tensions during military standoffs. The conclusion is that BRICS will survive China-India confrontations even amid the worsening geostrategic environment in Asia.

On 23 June 2020, the foreign ministers of the Russia, India and China (RIC) trilateral held a virtual meeting. Its timing was intriguing. Just one week prior to it, the armies of China and India engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand combat in the Galwan Valley in which twenty Indian troops and an unspecified number of Chinese troops<sup>1</sup> were killed. Following the clash, there was a heavy buildup of troops by both sides across different points of the line of actual control (LAC) and intense nationalistic fervour (see also Introduction by Verma and Papa 2021). Talk of a limited war was in vogue.

Yet, amid darkening clouds and manoeuvring for tit-for-tat escalation in the high Himalayas, neither China nor India boycotted the trilateral, whose agenda was to focus on broad themes like global trends following the COVID-19 pandemic. But much as Russia, the host of the RIC event, would have preferred to steer clear of geopolitically delicate issues, bilateral dynamics did creep in. India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar obliquely took aim at China by saying 'the leading voices of the world must be exemplars in every way' by 'respecting international law' and 'recognising the legitimate interests of partners' (Roy, 2020). China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi commented pointedly that 'we should correctly treat and properly handle the sensitive factors in bilateral relations' (Roy, 2020).

Notwithstanding these thinly veiled barbs and rising Sino-Indian friction, RIC carried on unimpeded and so did a meeting of senior officials of the bigger BRICS grouping on 2 July 2020. Even as the LAC standoff lengthened into a prolonged stalemate, the twelfth BRICS summit meeting happened nonetheless on 17 November 2020, with both President Xi Jinping of China and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India attending it through virtual means owing to the COVID-19

pandemic restrictions. The summit did not witness any testy Sino-Indian exchanges because the two sides had been engaging in several rounds of bilateral dialogue on a separate track from the multilateral BRICS agenda. A few days prior to the BRICS summit, the corps commanders of the two countries met at one of the friction points at the LAC and announced a three-step disengagement plan to move back their respective armies from one hotly contested area to positions before the Chinese incursions of April and May 2020 (ANI, 2020). While there was no guarantee of this plan working out owing to fears of strategic deception and mistrust, both sides decided to keep the BRICS summit and BRICS processes going without letting the military conflict affecting them.

If one takes a retrospective look, the bilateral animosity between China and India has been somewhat insulated from the BRICS multilateral agenda right since the 2006 launch of this unique intercontinental institution with a dream of hastening a multipolar world order. Formations like RIC, BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where both China and India are full members, have not been rendered irrelevant or paralysed by Sino-Indian rivalry, not even in extremely tense moments when Beijing and New Delhi nearly went to blows such as the 2013 Daulat Beg Oldi incident and the 2017 Doklam confrontation. One can be sanguine that BRICS will survive China–India conflicts in the future because it serves the national interests of both China and India to let this institution remain and flourish.

## 1. China's riposte to the West

Why have China and India persisted with BRICS in spite of their overflowing bilateral strategic mistrust? From a rational

perspective, states join, participate and remain in certain international institutions because they serve some of their specific national interests. The theory of rational institutionalism posits that 'states use international institutions to further their own goals, and they design institutions accordingly' (Koremenos et al., 2001, p. 762). Tine Hanrieder has further explained how founding states achieve their national interests via intergovernmental organisations. Multilateral institutions can help 'lock in political power' of the founders and 'preserve initial advantages via institutionalization' as well as 'veto opportunities' that prevent a future redistribution of control or rewriting of rules in favour of the materially most dominant member state. (Hanrieder, 2015, pp. 219, 232). Be it RIC or BRICS, India is a founding member and hence very much in a position to try and extract the most out of them as per its foreign policy objectives. Even though China has forged far ahead of India in economic and military power since BRICS was created in 2006, India is able to keep China under check in BRICS thanks to these path-dependent rationalist logics, a process I will illustrate subsequently in this article.

From China's perspective too, BRICS has served its self-interests over time. BRICS has fulfilled Beijing's key policy goal of forging alternative structures to the Western liberal order. BRICS 'helps China to counter US hegemony without direct confrontation' (Abdenur, 2014, p. 92) and is a stratagem of 'hiding in a group to avoid negative attention' (Glosny, 2010, p. 100). BRICS has been one way for China to dilute American 'containment and encirclement of China' via deepening practical and institutional integration with 'non-Western, rising economic powers' (Sun, 2013). Initially, when BRICS became a political reality in 2006 while American unipolar global dominance was evident, Beijing sought strength in collective action of emerging powers by harping on the unjustness of the US-led liberal order. As long as China thought of itself as a 'second-ranked power' in an international order marked by US preponderance, BRICS was a key 'soft balancing' instrument (Pape, 2005) for it to find partners to check the swagger of the US.

Even as China began to catch up with and overtake the US in economic terms after the 2008 global financial crisis,<sup>2</sup> the belief that BRICS was beneficial to rebuff the US' unilateral use of military force and to erode the US-dominated Bretton Woods system remained a byword in Beijing. However, with surging surpluses and soaring zeal to remake the world order, China under President Xi Jinping launched fresh multilateral institutions such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016 as part and parcel of China's 'institutional statecraft' with an eye on countering US hegemony (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017). Arguably, armed with the far bigger war chests and wider membership bases of the BRI and AIIB, China today does not see as much utilitarian purpose in BRICS alone. But China's allocation of diplomatic and economic resources to the BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB), operational since 2016, shows how Beijing's quest for one-upmanship with Washington still drives its BRICS-plus approach.

Without the US as an antithesis in Chinese grand strategy, it is inconceivable that BRICS would have retained such prominence for Beijing. The overarching motive of counterbalancing the US is so entrenched in China's foreign policy that it is willing to countenance having to break bread with and share decision-making authority with lesser powers like India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa in BRICS. This is why China tactically conceded to the model of equal stakeholders and joint governance of the NDB, even though China's GDP exceeds the combined GDP of the other four BRICS members. In behind-the-scenes bargaining, China first opposed but ultimately accepted the equal stakes formula (Jacob, 2014) and agreed to let an Indian become the first President of the NDB, followed by a Brazilian. It was a sacrifice of Chinese primacy keeping in mind the larger goal of strengthening BRICS as a paragon of genuine multilateralism, unlike the US model of global stability under a liberal hegemon.

## 2. India's pushback against China

If the US is the main reference point for China to valorise BRICS, then China is the strategic spectre goading India to be involved in shaping the group. Although India seeks the success of BRICS in order to usher in a multipolar world order which would lift New Delhi's global stature, scholars have noted the crucial difference that 'whereas China's approach focuses on the United States and the rest of the West, India's approach is increasingly positioned as a response to China' (Cooper and Farooq, 2016, p. 73). India's strategic logic of being active in BRICS is derived less from a desire to confront the US, a question on which Indian elites are ambivalent (Li, 2019), and more to stay inside the tent to ensure China does not attain a monopoly or commanding position in the institutional space of South–South cooperation. Given the decades-old Sino-Indian border dispute, China's encroachment into South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and China's 'all-weather alliance' with Pakistan, New Delhi is leery of Beijing's rise as a threat to its national security and its traditional leadership of the Global South. In recent years, India's anxieties have deepened as China has galloped ahead of it in economic and military power.<sup>3</sup>

Following the COVID-19 calamity, India's economy was projected to shrink by 7.7 per cent for the financial year 2020–21 (Dhoot, 2021). This contrasted with China, which was the only major economy that managed to notch a moderately positive GDP growth rate (Cheng, 2021) by containing the pandemic using drastic public health policy measures. The resulting gap in economic strength, which could translate into India falling further behind China in terms of overall military capability, are ominous signs for New Delhi that the threat from Beijing will increase. As I have outlined earlier in this essay, the widening power gap between China and the rest of the BRICS nations including India has altered the way China sees and deals with these countries. A former Indian Foreign Secretary notes that around the time when BRICS was launched, China viewed its partnership with India as having a 'global and strategic character'. But China has

lately grown so fast that 'the strategic and global dimension of India-China relations has weakened' and China's 'sensitivity to India's concerns is on the wane'. (Saran, 2017, pp. 147–148) It is indeed debatable if the tag of 'strategic partnership' which China and India declared way back in 2005 has any relevance at all in the current geopolitical environment. India is bracing for fierce strategic competition now, given what it perceives to be Chinese expansionism.

India's game plan against the hulking Chinese behemoth next door includes elements of hard power such as efforts to modernise its military, strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia and other regional powers in the Indo-Pacific, and a reinvigorated 'neighbourhood first' policy under Prime Minister Modi. In the institutional realm, India has adopted a nuanced posture of cooperation-cum-competition with China on an *à la carte* basis. It decided to join the AIIB as the second largest shareholder behind China. However, it shunned the BRI despite repeated Chinese overtures, and sought to launch competing connectivity initiatives to weaken the BRI. The rationale for this differentiated strategy is that India sees the BRI, which is more a 'forum' rather than an institution, as bringing 'relative gains' to China to penetrate India's zone of influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, while the AIIB is viewed as delivering 'absolute gains' for both China and India. India has received a large tranche of AIIB loans for its domestic infrastructure development needs and it also has enough voting share in AIIB to block lending to projects in 'disputed territories' like Pakistan-occupied Kashmir which India claims (Wu, 2020). India's critique of BRI echoes that of the US, as both take aim at China's 'debt trap' diplomacy and hidden hegemonic intentions in the guise of transcontinental trade and commerce. On the other hand, the AIIB received India's nod for not being a crude tool of Chinese expansionism but a relatively open and consensual institution wherein there can be 'cooperation between competing powers' (Cheng, 2020). If one calculates at a granular level, AIIB may be accruing higher relative gains in terms of global influence and prestige for China compared to India, given that the world views AIIB as essentially China's brainchild. Nevertheless, the path-dependent rationalist design of AIIB mitigates the asymmetry of China over India, and generates sufficient absolute gains for both Beijing and New Delhi to work together within this institution.

BRICS and its offspring like the NDB appeal to India as they seem similarly designed as the AIIB, that is, joint ventures with inbuilt consultative provisions at the time of their founding which guarantee that they cannot be hijacked by China to advance its geopolitical ascendancy. Should India quit or downgrade its participation in BRICS and AIIB, say over the worsening Sino-Indian border conflict or Chinese backing for Pakistan over jihadi terrorism, it would forfeit India's ability to moderate the Chinese juggernaut. This is why it has been rightly pointed out that 'India uses a number of international institutions, such as the BRICS mechanisms, the RIC frameworks, the AIIB and the SCO, as part of its soft-balancing strategy to restrain Beijing' (Han and Paul, 2020, p. 16). Just as BRICS is a necessary, but no longer the

sole, institutional device for China to roll back the US, it continues to be a necessary institutional apparatus for India to sophisticatedly tame China's hegemonic tendencies.

To boot, BRICS meets the criteria of public acceptability in India's democratic society as a status-enhancing multilateral institution which raises India's prestige and does not suborn India to play second fiddle to China. After the June 2020 violence at the LAC, Indian nationalists took to the streets, airwaves and cyberspace to demand mass boycott of Chinese-made goods and restrictions on Chinese services from accessing the Indian market. Hardly any fuss was raised about India's presence in RIC or BRICS though, since these institutions are not considered to be Chinese Trojan Horses or under Chinese tutelage. In an imperfect world where might is often right, BRICS stands out as an equitable multilateral platform which gives all members, including India, a lift and more visibility on the world stage (Cooper, 2016). Barring full-scale war between India and China, the domestic legitimacy of BRICS will not wither in Indian eyes. After the June 2020 border violence, some voices did advocate for India exiting BRICS (Mishra and Sharma, 2020). But New Delhi cannot afford the sunk costs of investing in co-creating and co-developing BRICS for the past fifteen years by letting the institution collapse. Leaving BRICS would weaken India's diplomatic trope of pursuing a multipolar world order which can facilitate an 'improved position' for India in the international system. (PTI, 2019). India's financial contribution of US\$18 billion to the NDB and its stake in the BRICS Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA) are also not trivial or dispensable. Above all else, there are strategic costs of an exit from BRICS as India's China problem requires it to be in BRICS and other BRICS members also gain from India's presence.

Consider Russia. Whether it is BRICS, RIC or SCO, Russia and India take mutual comfort in both being there and try to use these institutions to manage and balance the materially more powerful China. Although Russia has inched closer to China strategically owing to the two sides' shared antagonism toward the West, Moscow is acutely aware of its economic inferiority *vis-à-vis* Beijing and has looked to dilute China's asymmetric advantages by binding it in small-group multilateralism. There is a 'two-level nature' in Russia-China relations of counterbalancing the US at the level of the international system while 'hedging towards one another' in the Eurasian geopolitical context. (Korolev, 2016, p. 375). Unlike China and India, which compete for territory and influence in Asia, Russia and India have minimal conflicts of interest and Moscow sees New Delhi as a welcome check on Beijing's regional supremacy. This dynamic works in India's favour in subtle ways and helps maintain a certain strategic balance in multilateral clubs.

Russia desperately wanted India to be admitted as a full member of SCO and canvassed for it so as to whittle down China's predominance in Central Asia (Jiang 2020). Following the Galwan Valley clash, it came to light that Moscow intervened *sotto voce* to reduce tensions between Beijing and New Delhi and release Indian soldiers taken prisoner so as to 'create a situation that does not derail the RIC meet'

(Chaudhury, 2020). The potential of India boycotting an important multilateral event and sapping the efficacy of an institution where India matters is well understood, and this has more than once been a mitigating factor for Russia to creatively soften the sharp edges of Sino-Indian jousting. During the 2017 Doklam encounter between Chinese and Indian troops at the tri-junction with Bhutan, apart from direct bilateral channels, India also roped in Russia to impress upon China to step back (Parashar 2017). India also threatened to boycott the upcoming BRICS summit in China as a bargaining chip, and this seemed to have worked. It was a striking instance of how 'the very institutions that have facilitated China's prominence can be potentially used to constrain its behaviour and shape its choices' (Rej, 2017). That episode proved how China valued India's membership in BRICS and hence could sometimes subsume bilateral contestation to keep the multilateral institution intact.

### 3. Strange bedfellows with intersecting dreams

This essay has demonstrated how BRICS serves core national interests of both China and India in an intricate political manner. Often, the high-sounding moral rhetoric of BRICS as a crusade for fairness against Western neo-imperialism, and the nitty-gritty of BRICS cooperative projects to enhance intra-group trade, foreign investment and people-to-people linkages, can obfuscate the underlying strategic utility of the institution to its member states. Using the rational institutionalist theory, this essay explained why BRICS matters to China and India, and why both will keep contributing to its development in spite of their bilateral bad blood.

Undeniably, the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations deteriorated steeply after the June 2020 violence and India will have to continue to strategically resist Chinese encroachment over its land and maritime spaces. The combination of bitter China-India feuding and acrimonious China-US relations is exacerbating the general crisis of multilateralism the world is facing. But one must distinguish between universal multilateral institutions like the UN, whose salience may recede, and exclusive clubby institutions such as BRICS, which could carry on despite Sino-Indian discord.

Short of war, China and India can be expected to simultaneously coexist and compete inside BRICS and other such 'minilateral' institutions. Their behaviour reifies the theoretical notion that 'as states seek to exercise power and to influence the decisions and choices of others, institutions are one vehicle for them to do so' (Barkin and Weitsman, 2019, p. 24). Yet, while China and India cohabit in BRICS, their shared institutional association has not diminished the fierce bilateral competition between them. BRICS did help ease a Sino-Indian border crisis in 2017, but the much-invoked 'BRICS spirit' or 'BRICS values' are not magic wands to wave away the visceral conflicts between the Asian giants or merge their identities and interests into a syncretic fraternity or community through repeated socialisation (Checkel, 2005). As I have illustrated, the mutual wariness of China and India has only grown with time and it reflects in the internal politics of BRICS itself. In this sense, BRICS is one

more arena for Sino-Indian contestation and a continuation of jostling by other means. BRICS cannot bring about lasting peace between China and India, but it will endure as long as it fuels the nationalistic ambitions of these two upwardly mobile powers.

### Notes

1. China acknowledged the deaths of only four of its soldiers in this skirmish, that too eight months after it happened, in February 2021 (TNN, 2021).
2. In 2013, China surpassed the US in GDP measured in purchasing power parity. However, it lags the US in terms of comprehensive national strength/power.
3. During the June 2020 tension at the LAC, Chinese state-owned media crowed that 'China's GDP is five times that of India, military spending is three times' (Migliani and Ghosal, 2020).

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