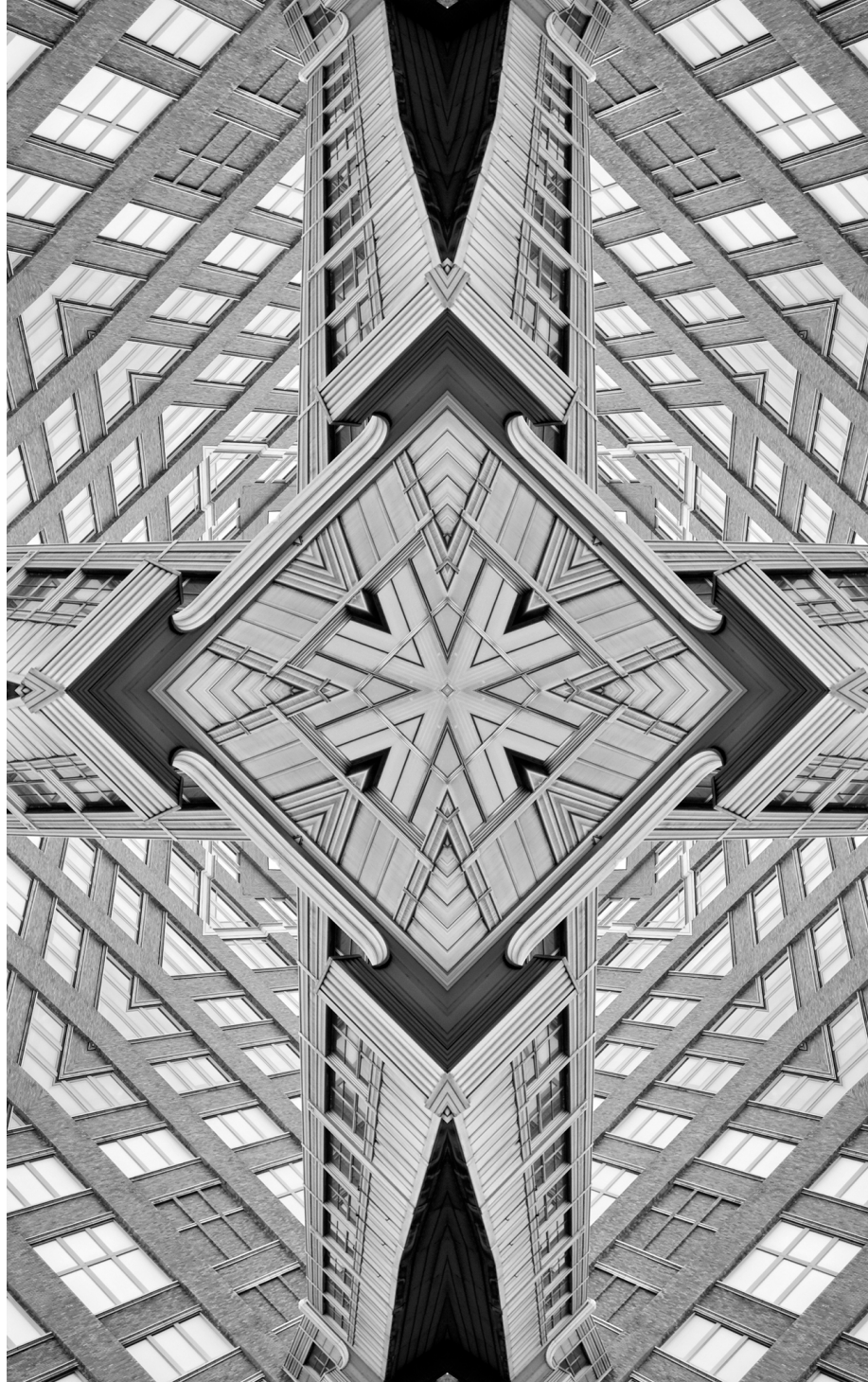


Issue

Brief

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BRICS and BRI: China Aims for Strategic Alignment

Antara Ghosal Singh

Abstract

China has twice broached the matter of expanding the membership of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa): first, at the 2017 Xiamen Summit, and again, more recently, at the 14th BRICS Leaders' Meeting in June 2022 convened virtually under the chairmanship of Beijing. With China and India locked in a stalemate along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Chinese proposal has raised concerns in New Delhi. This brief examines China's push for an expanded BRICS and finds that it is part of Beijing's larger strategy to link the grouping with its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

At the 14th Leaders' Meeting of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries held virtually on 23 June 2022, China dwelt on the issue of expanding the group beyond its five existing members to include more emerging economies. It had first raised the subject during the BRICS Xiamen Summit in September 2017. At a time when China-India relations are at a low point, the proposal has raised concerns in New Delhi. As India deliberates its stance on this contentious issue, it is important to understand China's approach towards BRICS.

For China, it is the grand strategy that is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that threads its many engagements: BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) where it is not directly a member, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Although BRICS as an entity, has not signed any memorandum of cooperation with the BRI, nor has it ever jointly published any statement of intent about participating in China's flagship project, in Chinese strategic thinking, the BRI and BRICS are deeply connected.

President Xi Jinping himself has harped on this notion in his speeches on multiple occasions, such as the 9th BRICS Business Forum in September 2017¹ and the 11th BRICS Leaders' Meeting in November 2019.² In his speech at the opening ceremony of the BRI Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 too, Xi had stated³ that China would cooperate with other multilateral development institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank to support BRI and jointly formulate guidelines to finance development projects.

There exists a huge body of Chinese-language research that analyse the feasibility of cooperation between BRICS and the BRI.⁴ Such literature emphasise the sameness of spirit and concept, principles, and goals of the two: that of reshaping the geopolitical and economic order, and fostering cooperation between mostly non-Western emerging economies. Commerce and trade, infrastructure construction, and people-to-people cooperation are seen as the key points of convergence.

This brief analyses China's domestic discourse on BRICS to understand its strategic thinking towards the grouping. It describes the various formats of expansion being discussed within Chinese strategic circles, and China's modus operandi vis-à-vis other member states to steer BRICS in a direction in line with its interests.

China's Approach towards BRICS: The Link with BRI

Chinese scholars are of the opinion that the “five connectivities”—i.e., policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people—constitute the common way forward for both the BRI and BRICS. They highlight how China has been working towards strengthening the interconnection of economic development strategies of different states along the BRI, particularly the BRICS nations—aligning and integrating BRI and BRICS infrastructure projects, ensuring unimpeded trade, enabling deep integration of financing mechanisms, and pursuing multiple forms of cooperation. The latter include people-to-people and cultural engagements between think tanks, and initiatives in the areas of education, sports, and tourism.

The most significant progress made so far by China in this regard has been the official docking between China's Silk Road Economic Belt (the land part of the BRI) and the EEU (where Russia is the dominant player) in May 2015. A high-speed railway project from Moscow to Kazan is being constructed under this strategic cooperation, funded by the BRICS New Development Bank.⁵ This is the model that China wants to replicate with other BRICS nations as well. In December 2015, South Africa and China signed a memorandum of understanding on jointly promoting the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”

The question is why China needs BRICS to promote the BRI. Chinese policymakers believe that although China is the main proponent of the BRI, it needs to avoid both strategic overdraft and direct conflicts with the pillars of the present international order while implementing the strategy.⁶ To improve efficiency in the use of funds and other resources, China, it is argued, should shift from individually leading specific projects to constructing and leading various international institutions and exerting itself through institutional norms.⁷ President Xi emphasised this as well at the ‘Belt and Road’ International Cooperation Summit Forum in May 2017, saying that the BRI “is not about starting from scratch and reinventing the wheel, but realising strategic alignment and (reaping) complementary advantages (of various existing or new mechanisms).”⁸ Chinese scholars point out that all the BRICS countries have already been made part of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), one of China's key financing mechanisms for the BRI. Further, given China's clear dominance in the New Development Bank

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(NDB), Contingency Reserve Fund (CRA), the AIIB, as well as Silk Road Fund, it is only imperative for it to use these institutions to incentivise more BRICS countries to participate in the BRI, and to lay the foundation of a global financial system for the Chinese currency (RMB) trade settlement.

At the same time, China is aware that the BRI has provoked extensive discussion around the world. It has been interpreted differently by different countries and has even drawn suspicion and caution in certain quarters. China is aware that to implement the BRI smoothly, it needs an additional front that is less controversial and more acceptable to the international community at large, and in particular, to developing countries.

The overall idea is to pool the strength of influential external forces, especially the best performing emerging economies, to facilitate the construction of the BRI; from such perspective, BRICS is the key international mechanism that China seems to be banking upon.⁹ After all, the BRICS countries are the key representatives of the developing world, and have a broad radiating role in their respective regions. They are often seen in China as the nodal countries that can take a lead in connecting and driving the economic development of other smaller/medium-size nations along the Belt and Road, help China expand its opening up agenda from the coastal areas to the interior, address its domestic surplus production capacity, deepen the influence of 'Made in China' across the regions and thereby assist in promoting and implementing the Belt and Road Grand Strategy. Therefore, in the Chinese assessment, if BRICS and BRI can be strategically aligned,¹⁰ it will not only bolster China's national interests but will also help shift the international order further in China's favour.¹¹

However, China is aware that a complete strategic docking between BRI and BRICS is unlikely in the short term, due to various issues between the BRICS member states such as asymmetry in economic power, the lack of mutual trust, and internal leadership competition. India and Russia, for instance, are strategic fulcrum countries along the Belt and Road, but both have misgivings, to varying extents, regarding the BRI. Thus China believes it should neither rush for BRICS's official support for the BRI, nor hype the issue up. Instead, it should ensure that the two mechanisms develop relatively independently

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of each other and leverage their unique advantages, while preventing them from conflicting. In the words of Zhang Weiwei, Distinguished Professor of Fudan University, BRICS and the BRI should function simultaneously as two levers, two thrusts in China's one big chess game, promoting a new type of globalisation, building a new international order, and driving the global governance system decisively in China's favour.¹²

Some Chinese scholars are of the opinion that under the present circumstances China should use BRICS as a tool to hedge against risks facing the BRI.¹³ They argue that if and when the US and the West actively respond to China's BRI, and even sacrifice some of their vested interests to cooperate with China in promoting the reform of the international order in China's favour, the political significance of BRICS cooperation will automatically weaken. However, when the West ups the ante against China, and takes radical measures to hinder the development of BRI, the political-economic significance of BRICS cooperation rises for China.¹⁴

“China is aware that a complete strategic docking between BRI and BRICS is unlikely in the short term due to various issues between the BRICS states.”

The Timing of China's Expansion Push

Chinese strategists believe that expanding BRICS will bring both challenges and opportunities. There may be new challenges in terms of declining organisational efficiency due to the increase in the number of members. However, the opportunities might just surpass the challenges. Expansion can be a short-cut to rapidly increasing the strength and international influence of BRICS, coping better with the ongoing economic slowdown facing the grouping¹⁵ and making up for the limited cooperation, both economic and strategic, among the current member countries.¹⁶ It would also become easier to get these new members to coordinate their positions with China on global and regional issues, thereby pushing the Chinese agenda more efficiently through BRICS to G20 to the greater global governance system.

The growing chorus in China is that internally, BRICS has started showing signs of weakness, is in retreat, and is lacking coherence in its actions. By attracting new members and replenishing it with fresh blood, China hopes to inject new impetus into it. It believes that the economic performance of BRICS countries, including China, in the past seven or eight years has deteriorated, and “golden BRICS” have turned into “stone BRICS”¹⁷ (金砖变成石砖). The era of rapid growth of BRICS seems to have passed for member countries Brazil, South Africa, and Russia. Brazil’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was negative in 2015 and 2016, increased to 1-2 percent in 2017-19, before dropping below zero again with the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, South Africa’s fell from 3 percent in 2010 to barely 0.1 percent in 2019, before plunging into negative territory once the pandemic struck. So too, did Russia’s GDP grow barely 0.7 percent in 2014, turned negative in 2015, recovered slowly to 2.8 percent in 2018, before contracting again in 2020.¹⁸ (All three, however, have shown some compensatory recovery in 2021.)

Chinese analysts maintain that the economic distress in Brazil and South Africa has been causing domestic political changes that are weakening their association with BRICS and their enthusiasm to cooperate. Both countries are unwilling to prioritise the BRICS agenda (read: Chinese agenda of reforming global governance in China’s favour through its BRI grand strategy) as they fear it could weaken their foreign policy flexibility and thereby jeopardise their national interests.¹⁹

The Timing of China's Expansion Push

The pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war have compounded the situation. The international competitiveness of the BRICS countries has lost traction, while the economies of the United States (US) and Europe are showing better signs of recovery. The US is still at the forefront of technology and industry. It is trying to regain its leadership of the global economy.²⁰ With the overall strength of the BRICS countries declining and facing heightened competition from traditional developed country-led cooperation mechanisms, China feels that limiting BRICS to its five members will further reduce its overall global influence and discourse power, which is detrimental to its interest.

Some Chinese observers also feel that unlike the G7^a where all members are highly developed nations, China's economic weight within BRICS far surpasses that of the others combined. They fear that the contradictions between developed and developing nations, between G7 and BRICS, may eventually come down to a contradiction between G7 and China. By absorbing new emerging market countries as BRICS members, this threat can be countered to a certain degree.²¹

The external factor behind China's interest in BRICS expansion is the intensifying China–US competition. Chinese observers recall how, when Barack Obama was US president, some political analysts had proposed a 'G2', or increased cooperation between the world's two biggest economies, the US and China. This had weakened the significance of BRICS for Chinese foreign policy. However, under the Donald Trump presidency, G2 quickly turned from high-level cooperation to high-decibel confrontation, and a larger, better coordinated BRICS (representing the broader developing world) became China's priority. It was in 2017, in the first year of Trump's presidency, that China, for the first time, proposed an expanded BRICS. Later, despite Joe Biden coming to power after defeating Trump, Chinese observers believe that US policy towards China has hardly changed, and that the 'new Cold War'—initiated during the Trump era—has instead been taken to a higher level.

a G7 members are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US.

The Timing of China's Expansion Push

In the backdrop of the Russia–Ukraine war, Europe has been dragged into a new Cold War environment, with a cohesive western bloc being formed,²² comprising the US and Europe. The war, Chinese analysts note, has become a glue²³ that effectively binds the US and Europe. They also argue that in Asia, the US is driving an increasing number of countries—Japan, Australia, India, New Zealand, and South Korea—into ‘smaller circles’ like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) pact, and even into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).^b All these at a time when the BRI is facing a plethora of challenges: intensifying geopolitical competition in the form of hedging strategies from the developed world like the Blue Dot Network and Build Back Better World (B3W); funding shortfalls; delays due to the pandemic; economic recession in participating countries; and bad publicity over issues of neo-colonialism and debt-trap. Under such circumstances, if China does not expand its circle of friends, it might risk appearing passive or falling behind in competition with the US.

Of particular concern to China is how amidst heightened geopolitics, trade conflicts, the epidemic, and industrial upgrading—the global industrial chain is being restructured at an accelerated pace, with efforts being made to replace the existing ‘US + West + China’ industrial model with newer models, particularly a ‘US + West + India’ one.²⁴ They believe this is aimed at isolating China and undermining its power and position in the emerging fourth wave of industrialisation. It is all the more reason for China to promote “a community of supply chains interests,”²⁵ by getting other emerging economies to join the BRICS supply chain (read: China’s supply chain). By embedding these countries in a China-led supply chain, potential competitors like India can be neutralised, and any effort to replace China in the current round of reorganisation of supply chains can be thwarted.

b QSD members are the US, Japan, India and Australia; IPEF members are Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Vietnam. South Korea and Japan participated in a NATO summit in June 2022 for the first time, and are seen as NATO’s ‘partners across the globe’.

The Models for China's BRICS Plan

Chinese strategists are exploring various models for expanding BRICS.

a. 'BRICS + new members'

The economic strength of a country and its development potential (i.e. large or medium-size countries showing rapid economic growth), are no longer the sole criteria for China while considering potential BRICS members. Political and identity commonality in the context of China-US competition, and geographic and locational advantages (issues that are otherwise central to the BRI agenda) have emerged as important points of reference.²⁶ Writings by Chinese scholars highlight that China is particularly keen on giving priority to emerging 11 countries (E11) from among the G20 members,^c (BRICS + Argentina, Indonesia, South Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Turkey), especially those whose strategic choices matter amidst the US-China game and are poised to actively participate in the BRI.

For instance, China is supporting Argentina's bid to join BRICS. Argentina joined the BRI in February 2022 on the grounds that it wants to reduce dependence on the IMF and the United States. China-Argentina cooperation under the BRI, in fields like nuclear energy, agriculture, and critical minerals has already alarmed Washington.²⁷ It is also in talks with China to not only purchase China-Pakistan-developed Xiaolong fighter jets but also to absorb its production line, evolving into a regional supplier of Chinese fighter jets and other military equipment to countries in the region such as Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and Cuba.²⁸ Some Chinese scholars believe that Argentina's accession to BRICS will further motivate countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Colombia to expedite their signing into the Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding.²⁹

^c The G20 members are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union.

The Models for China's BRICS Plan

b. 'BRICS + region'³⁰

In the Chinese assessment, the 'BRICS + region' model provides another possible means of bringing more emerging economies into the BRICS fold, while avoiding internal divisions in the developing world. In this domain, China prioritises the 'BRICS + Asia' cooperation mechanism – 'BRICS + ASEAN' on the one hand, and 'BRICS + Bay of Bengal' on the other, thereby integrating BRICS more closely with the Southeast Asian countries as well as with the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) nations. The latter is particularly aimed at countering India's reticence to endorse the BRI, while seeking its cooperation through either coercion (i.e., using other member states of the said groupings as bargaining chips to pressure India to cooperate) or deception (i.e., temporarily ignoring the BRI banner).³¹

China also wants to deepen 'BRICS + Africa', 'BRICS + South America' and 'BRICS + Eurasia' formats along similar lines to further promote infrastructure interconnection and regional economic integration between China and these regions under the BRI. The 'BRICS + region' model was initiated at the summit in Durban, South Africa, in March 2013, but Chinese observers note that it has yet to achieve significant progress in the absence of a general consensus and institutional norms.³²

c. 'BRICS + major international organisations'

BRICS countries play a dominant role in multilateral organisations in their respective regions. China wants to use the BRICS platform to establish links and influence policies of these key regional organisations, including the African Union in Africa, the Arab League in West Asia, the SCO in Central Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in South Asia, and ASEAN in Southeast Asia. It wants BRICS, especially the BRICS New Development Bank, to strengthen cooperation with the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. This will enable China, through BRICS, to strengthen its international leadership, play a bigger role in the formulation of international rules, and influence the overall global governance mechanism.³³

China-Russia Convergence Within BRICS

How does China view each member state within BRICS? It sees itself as the ‘leading power centre’ of the mechanism, ‘the dominant power’ or the ‘hub or core’, with the greatest strength and ability to determine the grouping’s future course.³⁴ India, the only economy among the five that is still doing well, is often considered indispensable in terms of expanding the group’s economic scale, market capacity, and discourse power and influence.³⁵ However, despite its centrality to the BRICS mechanism, Chinese observers call it the group’s weakest link. There are two reasons: its fraught ties with China, and its rapidly developing ties with the western world. On the other hand, Brazil and South Africa, given their limited strength and geographical distance from the other member states, are often seen as ‘free-riders’.³⁶ Russia, meanwhile, is understood to be both dependent on China and wary of it.

Given the backdrop, the Chinese strategy is clear: to undercut the role and agency of India, Brazil and South Africa, if possible winning over the last two, using its financial heft.³⁷ Meanwhile, it seeks to utilise China-Russia ties as the bedrock for further developing BRICS in a direction that is in sync with its broader goals and objectives.³⁸

Chinese strategists believe that among the BRICS countries, Russia and China have the strongest motivation to promote the grouping, though some differences remain between the two about the speed and direction of its institutionalisation. Russia emphasises the political significance of BRICS cooperation, while China’s focus is on economics followed by politics. Russia prioritises deepening and strengthening the cohesion and organisation of the mechanism, while China primarily wants to expand its scale—its influence and overall discourse power in international affairs and global governance.³⁹ However, China believes that its differences with Russia are not completely irreconcilable and the two can better coordinate their positions.

Russia of late, due to changes in the international situation and its confrontation with the West, has become more receptive to the Chinese proposition of expanding BRICS. It has become more open towards accepting other regional powers as ‘dialogue partners’ or ‘observer countries’. Its key concern is whether such expansion will meet its strategic demands and strengthen its diplomatic position vis-à-vis the US and West Europe.⁴⁰

China-Russia Convergence Within BRICS

Many Chinese scholars believe that it is also time for China to support Russia's proposal to establish a permanent BRICS secretariat, and push for formulating rules and regulations, particularly to restrain members like India from leaning any further towards the West. They argue that the permanent institutions established through BRICS cooperation can be incorporated into the unified institutional framework of the BRI at an appropriate time.⁴¹ However, they caution such plans need not be rushed, and China must adopt a step-by-step approach towards establishing a permanent BRICS Secretariat.⁴²

In the short term, the current 'forum' format of BRICS with its flexible mode of operation suits China. Unlike the G7, the BRICS countries have many inherent contradictions among them, and coordinating a permanent institution will be difficult. However, in the medium term, China wants to make BRICS an economic cooperation community, on the basis of which a BRICS executive committee can be set up, as a dry-run for the future official secretariat of BRICS. In the long term, it plans to establish a permanent BRICS secretariat, addressing the current weaknesses of the BRICS mechanism, particularly the lack of cohesion, and thereby ensure concrete implementation of the consensus reached at the leaders' summits. Some Chinese scholars⁴³ even advocate a China-Russia-India Trilateral Cooperation Organisation within the overall framework of BRICS. The body will be a deputy-minister-level permanent entity that will unify and coordinate positions, solve problems, deepen cooperation, and most importantly, frustrate any US attempt to win over India.⁴⁴

Despite the seemingly growing convergence of interest between Russia and China within the BRICS format, the 'Russia-optimism' shared by a section of Chinese strategic community needs to be viewed with caution. Overall, China's strategic community remains particularly suspicious of Russian actions and their impact on China. For instance, in 2016 as Russia invited Greece to join the BRICS Bank, there were angry commentaries in the Chinese internet accusing Russia of misusing China's generosity to achieve its (Russian) strategic goals. One Chinese author described the situation as "Russia treating guests to dinner, and China having to foot the bill."⁴⁵ More recently, there were heated debates in the Chinese internet, including strong objections, as Russia proposed to form a new G8 (BRICS+ Indonesia, Mexico, Iran, and Turkey) right after China's BRICS expansion proposal at the 14th BRICS Summit. Possibly after a Chinese push-back, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had to retract on the decision, saying Russia no longer needs to set up a new group as it is already part of EEU, SCO, BRICS, and G20, among others.⁴⁶

In Chinese strategic thinking, the BRI and BRICS are deeply interconnected. BRICS, comprising the world's best performing emerging economies, is a less controversial platform and more appealing to the developing world. It is often seen as the key international mechanism that can act as the second front or as the “leading geese”, aiding and advancing China's BRI objectives. As China-US rivalry intensifies and the BRI faces a plethora of challenges, BRICS is increasingly gaining significance for China.

Within the grouping, China sees itself as the ‘core’ of BRICS, while India as its weakest link. Brazil and South Africa are often dismissed as “free-riders”, while Russia is considered the main tool to advance Chinese interests within the BRICS framework. China is aiming to undercut the role and agency of India, Brazil and South Africa—if possible, winning over the last two using its financial heft—while utilising China-Russia ties as the bedrock for further developing BRICS in a direction that suits its interests.

As noted in this brief, however, it is not always easy for China to implement such a strategy. Brazil and South Africa, with their deteriorating economic performance and unstable domestic political situations, are unwilling to commit much to China and thereby compromise on their foreign policy flexibility. On the other hand, there is a constant game between China and Russia over who will use whom, to further their self-interest.

It is against this backdrop that China is proposing a BRICS expansion. Economic strength and development potential are not the sole criteria for China while considering potential BRICS members. Political and identity commonality in the context of China-US competition, geographic and locational advantages, willingness to support the BRI, are seen as important points. India needs to accurately grasp the geopolitical shifts taking place within BRICS and deftly navigate the complex dynamics between the member states to safeguard its own interests within the grouping and avoid being drawn passively into China's Great Game. 

Antara Ghosal Singh is a Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org