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FROM 2025 TO 2026: INDIA'S PRIORITIES AT BRICS

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the BRICS Summit Plenary session on ‘Strengthening Multilateralism, Economic-Financial Affairs, and Artificial Intelligence’ in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. | Image Courtesy: X/@narendramodi

As India will assume the presidency of BRICS from January 1, 2026, it aims to rebrand the platform with a ‘humanity-first approach’ for the 18th Summit. While addressing the session on ‘environment, COP-30, and global health’ on July 7, 2025, during the 17th Summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined the agenda for next year. The 18th Summit will prioritise the voice of the Global South to present a ‘new form’ of the BRICS: Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability. Yet, this rebranding effort risks being undermined, given India’s approach to advancing national priorities within the group, particularly counterterrorism and trade, rather than building on collective member concerns.

The 17th BRICS Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, highlighted this distinction. While the agenda covered global governance, peace and security, economic development and technologies for sustainable development, India concentrated on counterterrorism and economic resilience, issues rooted in its national priorities rather than collective multilateral ones. The challenge for India’s 2026 chairship will be to convert tactical diplomatic gains into structural reforms that align with its rebranding efforts.

COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS

India scored a diplomatic victory at Rio with the final declaration condemning the April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack. No BRICS country had previously spoken out against the incident, and China even supported Pakistan's right to defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity following India's military response.

New Delhi securing this explicit language was notable, but it was more symbolic than structural. The divergence is clear; for India, counterterrorism is a national security imperative, for others, particularly China, it is peripheral and often entangled with geopolitical calculations. Even when the Rio declaration included a reference to terrorism in Syria and Sudan, this reflected India's push to widen the discourse rather than intra-bloc convergence.

Bilateral cooperation, such as India's joint statement with Brazil, adds diplomatic weight to the matter, but does not translate into bloc-wide alignment. This reveals a deeper pattern: India can further its objectives at BRICS, but making counterterrorism a collective priority is less likely.

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Where India has more room for manoeuvre is economic resilience, which entails streamlining intra-bloc trade. This can occur through dismantling export controls and easing financial burdens. The founding members have called for trade in national currencies, an "independent settlement system", to improve speed and efficiency. These members are navigating resiliency amid trade tensions with the United States as they face reciprocal tariffs: 50% for Brazil and India, 30% for China and South Africa, and the targeting of Russian oil exports through increased tariffs on its partners. This shared context offers New Delhi a better chance of forging common ground.

A central pillar of the reform agenda is the expansion of alternative financial institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB), envisioned as a credible financing alternative for the Global South. Under the Strategy for Economic Partnership 2030, partners will cooperate on multilateral trade issues, the digital

economy, financial cooperation, and sustainable development. Further, they initiated discussions for a BRICS multilateral guarantees initiative to de-risk strategic investment and improve creditworthiness in BRICS and the Global South.

At the 15th BRICS Trade Ministers' Meeting, India called for dismantling export controls among BRICS members to strengthen intra-bloc trade. Additionally, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, speaking at the 10th Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the NDB, emphasised the need for increased agility and technological advancement of the NDB, positioning India as a leading voice in this transformation.

Unlike counterterrorism, this domain allows India to channel its rebranding into deliverables. A formal trade agreement, meaningful progress on payments in national currencies, or expansion of the NDB's capital base, currently at \$100 billion, would constitute durable outcomes. These steps would enhance India's credibility as chair and demonstrate that its "humanity-first" agenda has institutional substance.

BEYOND SYMBOLIC BRANDING

India's 2026 chairship will hinge on whether it can move from rhetorical victories to structural reforms. The Rio Summit gave India more visibility; however, the bloc still lacks enforceable mechanisms on issues central to New Delhi, such as the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). Overemphasising counterterrorism risks enforcing the perception that India is steering BRICS for narrow national ends.

The bigger opportunity lies in leading consensus where member priorities overlap: strengthening alternative financial institutions and encouraging intra-bloc trade. Expanding the NDB's capital base is essential to present it as a credible alternative, conducive to trade in national currencies. For BRICS, the goal is to streamline trade payments, not to challenge the dominance of the US

dollar. De-dollarisation is not on the agenda for now, but members are working to build resilience through trade in national currencies.

India must also avoid allowing critical security issues to crowd out broader strategic concerns. Though addressed at Rio, climate change, critical minerals supply chains, and AI remain key areas where BRICS countries share long-term stakes. If India aims to rebrand BRICS as a platform of relevance, it must ensure these themes find a central place in its 2026 agenda.

India's ambitions for its BRICS chairship are high: to transform the bloc into a genuine collective platform for the Global South under a humanity-first vision. Yet, ambition alone is not enough. Counterterrorism gains, while diplomatically valuable, remain tactical and fragile. Economic resilience and institutional reform, by contrast, provide an opportunity to build durable mechanisms. The test for India is whether it can pivot from symbolic victories to institutional outcomes, without which the rebranding risks being reduced to rhetoric. The Rio Summit showcased both India's diplomatic skill and the bloc's limits; the New Delhi Summit will reveal whether India can bridge the gap between aspiration and reality.



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