

EVENT REPORT

Roundtable Discussion on

The 18th BRICS Summit: India's Priorities and the Future of the Global South



8 September 2026



Kottayam, Kerala



Organised by

**Centre for Public Policy Research | Kochi
& Mahatma Gandhi University | Kottayam**

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About the Event

Ahead of the 18th BRICS Summit, the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), Kochi, in collaboration with Mahatma Gandhi University (MGU), Kerala, convened a roundtable titled “The 18th BRICS Summit: India’s Priorities and the Future of the Global South” on 8 September 2026, with BRICS experts assessing the priorities emerging from India’s Chairship and what New Delhi should seek to deliver.

The discussion reflected on BRICS’s evolution from a four-country grouping into a platform shaping global governance, trade, and South-South cooperation. It centred on four themes: coherence within an enlarged BRICS, India’s priorities at New Delhi, BRICS’s relevance to the Global South, and India’s balancing act with the US, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific.

The roundtable brought together academicians, researchers, students, and experts, whose perspectives and policy recommendations will inform an issue brief on India’s priorities and the future of the Global South, to be presented to government stakeholders ahead of the Summit. Speakers included Prof. Dr G. Gopakumar and Mr Manoj P. V., with Dr Jojin V. John moderating the discussion.

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Summary of Discussion



Panellists:

- **Prof. Dr. G. Gopakumar:** Former Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Kerala (CUK).
- **Manoj P.V:** Senior Fellow (China Studies) at the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), Kochi.

Moderator:

- **Dr. Jojin V John:** Assistant Professor at the School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University (MGU), Kerala.

Prof. Dr G. Gopakumar traced BRICS's evolution amid the changing international system since the 2008 financial crisis, noting how the Russia-Ukraine war, the Gaza conflict, and West Asian tensions have exposed divisions within the grouping. He argued that BRICS should push for UN Security Council (UNSC) reform, with India, Brazil, and South Africa advocating stronger Global South representation, while acknowledging that India's UNSC ambitions require sustained diplomatic engagement with China and Russia. He stressed that India cannot afford to distance itself from the West, given the importance of trade, technology, and supply chains, and that India's strategic autonomy depends on balancing BRICS, the G20, and the Quad. On the economic front, he highlighted de-dollarisation, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), and the New Development Bank (NDB) as key

levers for South-South financial cooperation, while noting that a common BRICS currency remains conceptual. He also flagged China's lead in AI as a challenge India must address, and concluded that BRICS's success will depend on strategic rapport among members rather than numerical expansion alone. Mr Manoj PV situated India's Chairship within a volatile global landscape marked by roughly 25 active conflict zones and traced continuity in India's positions from the Kazan and Rio Summits. He reaffirmed India's consistent emphasis on diplomacy and dialogue over conflict and its long-standing push for counter-terrorism cooperation, including its 1993 UN proposal on a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. He identified critical mineral supply chains as a pressing global concern given China's dominance and called for India to take a more active role in shaping AI governance through its "AI for All" and responsible AI approach. He identified climate change, food and water insecurity, and terrorism financing as key challenges relevant to the Global South, while highlighting cross-border digital payments, including India's UPI, as a potential avenue for strengthening future BRICS cooperation. On India-China relations, he noted the recent post-Galwan diplomatic thaw and proposed that India work toward a joint communique with China at the Summit to demonstrate cooperation despite bilateral differences.

Dr. Jojin V. John framed BRICS's informality, its lack of a formal charter or secretariat, as a source of flexibility relative to institutions like the UN, allowing it to evolve from a pressure group in the early 2010s toward institution-building through mechanisms like the NDB and CRA. He noted that the post-2020 period deepened BRICS's geopolitical character, as the grouping increasingly positioned itself against Western dominance while rebranding as a voice for the Global South. He cautioned that this expansion has imported regional rivalries and geopolitical contradictions into the BRICS framework itself, raising questions about internal cohesion. He concluded that the Summit's success should be judged not by membership numbers or declarations, but by BRICS's ability to convert its growing political weight into concrete, tangible outcomes.

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Inputs From Roundtable

1. The Changing Nature and Purpose of BRICS

Unlike the UN, BRICS operates without a formal charter or secretariat, giving members flexibility without binding obligations. It evolved from a pressure group challenging the IMF and World Bank into a parallel institution-builder, anchored by the NDB and CRA, a shift that gathered pace around 2014 as the grouping moved beyond collective bargaining toward building institutions of its own. Since 2022, following the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the broader post-COVID realignment, BRICS has taken on a sharper geopolitical and anti-Western tone, rebranding itself as a vehicle for Global South unity and a multipolar world order. This relative informality is also seen as a source of strength because participation does not carry the same binding political obligations as membership in institutions like the UN, BRICS can accommodate a wider and more diverse set of members, even as this raises open questions about how such a flexibly structured body can eventually mature into a more institutionalised body, potentially with its own secretariat.

2. Expansion and Internal Coherence

The enlargement to ten (now eleven) members has strengthened BRICS's claim to represent the Global South but has also deepened internal contradictions. Divergent positions among Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, alongside the continuing India-China rivalry, illustrate the difficulty of maintaining cohesion as membership diversifies. Regional conflicts and geopolitical rivalries among members are increasingly being imported into the BRICS framework itself, raising concerns about the grouping's ability to depoliticise internal disputes and act as a coherent bloc. Comparisons were drawn with more tightly integrated regional groupings such as ASEAN, with the observation that BRICS still lacks the depth of mutual understanding and connectivity between members that such organisations have built over time. Ultimately, BRICS's success should be judged by its ability to deliver tangible outcomes and sustain strategic rapport among members, not by member count or the volume of declarations issued at summits.

3. India's Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

India is navigating a careful balance between Global South solidarity and continued engagement with the West. This includes pursuing UN Security Council reform with support from China and Russia, defending South Africa's G20 membership against US pressure, and maintaining trade and technology ties with Western economies through simultaneous participation in BRICS, the G20, and the Quad. This balancing act is complicated by an unpredictable global environment, particularly the aggressive posture of the US under the Trump administration on tariffs, trade, and West Asia, which has created additional pressure on countries seen as sympathetic to Iran or the wider Global South. Even so, India's engagement with the West on trade, technology, and resilient supply chains was seen as indispensable, reinforcing the view that strategic autonomy is not a choice between blocs but a continuous exercise in managing overlapping and sometimes competing partnerships. India's long-standing relationship with Russia was also flagged as an asset that could be leveraged further through the BRICS platform.

4. India-China Relations within the BRICS Framework

Relations remain in a fragile post-Galwan recovery phase. A recent 400-member Chinese business delegation to India offers one signal of this shift, suggesting a possible Chinese recalibration toward prioritising economic engagement and trade with India, though it remains too early to read this as a definitive policy reorientation. Despite a persistent trust deficit and unresolved border issues, talks are continuing at the diplomatic level, and BRICS was seen as a useful platform for confidence-building alongside these bilateral channels. A proposed joint communique at the Summit's conclusion was floated as a tangible signal of cooperation despite differences. China's support was also flagged as important for India's UN Security Council aspirations, suggesting that sustained diplomatic engagement with Beijing even amid unresolved rivalry could serve India's broader multilateral goals.

5. Emerging Economic and Technological Priorities

Discussions highlighted de-dollarisation through the CRA and local-currency settlements, alongside India's UPI as a potential model for BRICS-wide digital payments. They also pointed to the widening AI capability gap with China's WAICO initiative, from which India remains outside. Participants noted that a common BRICS currency remains largely conceptual, with more immediate opportunities lying in local-currency trade and cross-border digital payment mechanisms, even as such initiatives are likely to face resistance from the United States. Critical mineral supply chains emerged as a strategic concern

given China's dominant position and export restrictions, alongside broader worries about globalisation widening economic gaps rather than narrowing them. Counter-terrorism cooperation was raised as a long-standing Indian priority, tracing back to its 1993 UN proposal for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, though hampered by the absence of a universal definition of terrorism among members. Finally, the climate-water-AI nexus was flagged as an urgent cross-cutting concern, with the rising number of AI data centres across the Global South linked to increased water consumption and added strain on climate and environmental resources alongside food security, climate finance, and maritime security as areas requiring greater collective BRICS attention.

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Key Recommendations

1. Strengthen institutional depth over numerical expansion

BRICS should prioritise building strategic rapport and coordinated action among members over further enlargement, ensuring the grouping translates political weight into measurable outcomes.

2. Pursue UNSC reform through sustained China-Russia engagement

India should continue diplomatic outreach to secure Chinese and Russian backing for permanent Security Council membership, using BRICS as a confidence-building platform alongside bilateral channels.

3. Advance a joint India-China communique

A joint statement at the Summit's conclusion would demonstrate that cooperation on trade and economic growth remains possible despite bilateral differences, even as diplomatic efforts continue separately to resolve the border dispute.

4. Invest in AI capability and shape global governance norms

India should scale up domestic AI investment to narrow the gap with China, while actively promoting "AI for All" and Responsible AI frameworks as alternatives to exclusive blocs like WAICO.

5. Expand local-currency trade and cross-border digital payment mechanisms

Rather than pursuing a common BRICS currency, which remains conceptual, members should prioritise immediate, practical steps such as local-currency trade settlement and cross-border adoption of systems like India's UPI.

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Conclusion



The discussion highlighted that BRICS is undergoing an important transition from an economic grouping of emerging economies into a broader geopolitical and strategic platform for the Global South. While its expansion has strengthened its representational significance and created greater opportunities for South-South cooperation, it has also brought greater diversity of interests and internal contradictions, particularly in the context of India-China relations and divergent positions on regional conflicts.

For India, this evolving framework presents both opportunities and challenges. India can use its BRICS Chairship to advance the interests of the Global South, promote reform of multilateral institutions and strengthen the case for a more representative and multipolar international order, while simultaneously maintaining its strategic partnerships with the West, Quad and G20.

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Photogallery



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Team

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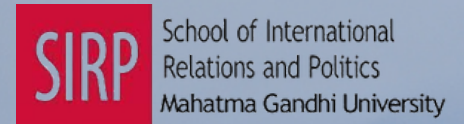
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