



India and the World

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India's upcoming minilateral tests

The new year is fast approaching, and for India, like other major powers, there are several moving parts on the foreign policy horizon. Indian strategy regarding the management of these developments may become visible through observation of New Delhi's activity in minilateral groupings. It is in the context of such groupings and "clubs", in addition to bilateral relations — rather than within the wider multilateral UN system or Bretton Woods institutions — that one may decipher how India and other middle and rising powers aim to make the most out of current convulsions in the post-Second World War order.

A test of India's ability to implement its multi-vector diplomacy and balance great power politics, while aiming to achieve beneficial outcomes particularly in the sphere of development, will come in its engagements in coming months with two central minilateral groupings: BRICS+ and the Quad. On January 1, New Delhi will assume the rotating chairmanship in the now expanded BRICS, while planning to participate in a delayed Quad Leaders' Summit in the first quarter of the new year.

Through engagements in these two minilaterals, New Delhi aims to pursue complementary objectives — Global South leadership and development outcomes through BRICS, and Indo-Pacific stability and resilience through the Quad. For India, the priority will be to find a balance between its diverse economic and strategic interests, all the while the stakes are being raised in India's major bilateral partnerships with the U.S., China, the EU — and even Russia. These interests are driven by New Delhi's ambitions of safeguarding policy space for its own development trajectory and its continued quest for strategic autonomy; these ambitions are in turn constrained by institutional and historic factors.

In both these groupings, India has to some extent – but for different reasons – been perceived as a pace setter for cooperation. As BRICS chair, India aims to keep the grouping economically oriented rather than geopolitical. With strong similarities to its programme for the G20, New Delhi seeks to deliver concrete results on sustainable development initiatives, reduce intra-BRICS trade imbalances and promote ethical use of AI. The expansion of BRICS to include several energy suppliers as well as financial centres means that an agenda of energy security and investment facilitation has also risen to the top of the agenda.

Geopolitically, its approach to BRICS is also shaped by its increasingly complex ties with the U.S., a relationship in which trade tensions coexist with shared strategic interests in balancing China. To avoid disturbances in the U.S. relationship, India will seek to keep BRICS from appearing anti-Western, while advocating global governance reform and multipolarity. Overall, India seeks to make BRICS more institutionalised, cohesive, and results-oriented. But structural constraints within the grouping remain significant. These include India-China tensions, the rising costs associated with continued partnership with Russia, and divergent interests within a rapidly expanding organisation.

In the Quad, India will seek to strengthen its role as a key regional partner, focusing on pragmatic, functional cooperation in maritime security, critical technologies, resilient supply chains, and disaster response, rather than formal alliance-building. Central to this approach is a calibrated balance toward China: By endorsing a “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific” without explicitly naming Beijing, India aims to hedge against coercion while maintaining strategic flexibility.

Like in BRICS, it prioritises issue-based cooperation over collective commitments, aiming for tangible regional benefits, with the main challenge being to translate this flexible strategy into outcomes that influence regional behaviour without limiting its own strategic autonomy. The balancing act is fragile: Deeper Quad engagement implicitly hedges against China and might trigger a response — particularly at a time of poor relations between Japan and China — while a stronger BRICS could potentially amplify Chinese influence.

The policy test for India is whether this dual engagement can deliver tangible, desired outcomes without eroding credibility on either side. If successful, it would validate India's role as a pragmatic and competent bridge-builder in an era of international polarisation.



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