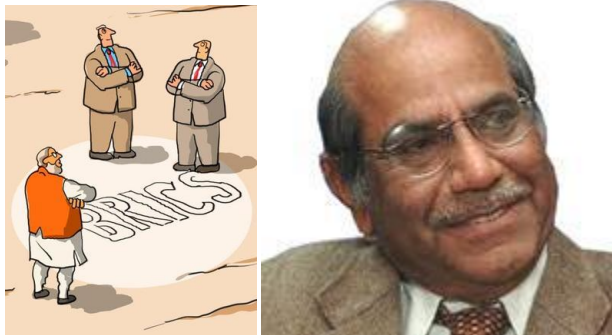


Summit over substance

[Shyam Saran](#)



Forthcoming summits will reflect India's status as a key player both regionally and internationally. But unless we move from an event-oriented to a process-driven diplomacy, this will only be a transient gain

Barely six weeks after participating in the G-20 summit at Hangzhou, China, and the East Asia and ASEAN-India summits at Vientiane, Laos, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will himself play host to the annual **BRICS summit** in Goa on October 15-16, 2016. This will bring together the heads of state of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and the summit theme put forward by India is “Building Responsive, Inclusive and Collective Solutions”, which is a clever play on the letters constituting the membership of the grouping. India has also exercised its privilege as host to arrange a regional outreach.

At the Fortaleza summit in 2014, Brazil had invited several heads of state/government from Latin America, while at Ufa last year Russia had invited the leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. One would have expected India to have invited SAARC leaders to the outreach but it has chosen to host the leaders of the seven-member BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) instead. BIMSTEC is a potential Bay of Bengal Economic Community comprising Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka from South

Asia and Myanmar and Thailand from ASEAN. The motivation is obvious, to avoid having to invite Pakistan. BIMSTEC will also hold its fourth summit in Goa. Nepal was to have hosted it in 2015 but was unable to do so mainly on account of the earthquake and the subsequent political turmoil. Not much should be expected from the BIMSTEC summit. It has been as somnolent as SAARC has been since its inception.

The China-Russia dynamic

There will be greater focus on the BRICS summit mainly because of the stature of those who will be attending, including President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China. Both have a shared image of being tough leaders, of having defied the U.S. and the West, and now edging closer to a closer security partnership, if not an alliance. The largest ever Sino-Russian joint naval exercises are being held in the South China Sea off the coast of Guangdong province. And Russia is the only country to have explicitly supported China's stand on the South China Sea dispute, of rejecting the international tribunal award and proposing bilateral dialogue with claimant countries, though it has not endorsed its territorial claims.

There will be a Chinese effort to include in the summit declaration a formulation similar to what had been agreed upon in the India-Russia-China trilateral Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow in April this year and which appeared to support China's stand: "Russia, India and China are committed to maintaining a legal order for the seas and oceans based on the principles of international law, as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS). All related disputes should be addressed through negotiations and agreements between the parties concerned. In this regard the Ministers called for full respect of all provisions of UNCLOS, as well as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the Guidelines for the implementation of the DOC."

This was before the tribunal award. Now having a formulation along these lines in the BRICS declaration, post the award, would be of even greater value to China, which will undoubtedly press for it with Russian support. Indian negotiators will probably resist. Already after the Moscow meeting there had been criticism that India was speaking with two voices, one when in the company of Americans and the other when meeting with the Chinese and Russians. Furthermore, given Chinese opposition to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and its blocking at the UN of naming the Pakistani Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist, it is likely that India may dig in on this point. We shall wait and see.

A triangular game

The other two leaders, Brazil's Michel Temer and South Africa's Jacob Zuma, are unlikely to come up with any notable initiatives. Their countries are suffering from both political and economic turmoil. Mr. Temer has taken over after a politically polarising impeachment of the former Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff. Mr. Zuma is facing

serious charges of corruption, and there has been unprecedented infighting in his ruling African National Congress. So it will be mostly a triangular game among Mr. Modi, Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi, and the latter two seem to be leaning closer to each other. This will be a challenge for the Indian host.

For Mr. Modi, a strong and categorical statement on counter-terrorism will be a must even though neither China and now nor Russia will countenance the naming of Pakistan or even an oblique reference to it. Brazil and South Africa do not have much play in this game. So expect a strong formulation but more general in scope.

BRICS has begun to suffer the affliction characteristic of several other multi-country groupings, and that is the exponential expansion in its committees, working groups and forums resulting in an extraordinarily crowded calendar of meetings. There are now over a hundred such bodies covering a multiplicity of subjects ranging from trade, investment and finance, to health, education and security. India itself has been hosting several tens of these meetings during the year in its capacity as incoming chair, but it is questionable whether such hyper activity leads to substantive outcomes. The impression one has is of being stretched too thin across a steadily expanding space with neither the human nor the financial resources to follow through. The event itself then becomes the focus and not the process. It is no surprise then that outcomes from such summitry are sparse.

BRICS has one practical outcome to its credit, and that is the New Development Bank, and an Indian, K.V. Kamath, is its president. The Bank has been operationalised and India has reportedly received loans totalling about \$300 million. But this institution is overshadowed by the much better funded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated and led by the Chinese. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), another important BRICS initiative, remains on paper. There is a proposal for the setting up of a BRICS Credit Rating Agency to challenge the monopoly of the West, and this might be of value if adopted. On the trade side any hint of a BRICS free trade agreement comes up against the fears both India and Russia have of being swamped by Chinese imports. It will not have traction even though none of the five countries are part of any of the emerging mega trade blocs like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). At a time when both TPP and TTIP are stalled, even a hint of a mega trade bloc of the key emerging economies would be a major development. It could even bring the World Trade Organisation back in play!

The BIMSTEC summit could be an important occasion for reviving what, on the face of it, appears to be a grouping with immense potential. Its attraction is that China is not there to crowd India out, and it fits in very well with the logic of India's Act East policy. The parallel Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which is a platform for India's exclusive engagement with the countries of Indo-China (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) and Myanmar, could also be a major component of the Act East strategy. But neither BIMSTEC nor the MGC have lived up to their potential, and India's engagement with them has been mostly episodic and ad hoc. There are sets of activities under both but they do not add up to a well-thought-out and long-term strategy of integrating India more closely with its eastern neighbourhood. The perception remains that India

continues to be at the margins of this increasingly contested geopolitical space, unable to play a significant role in shaping its emerging economic and security architecture.

Trailing on connectivity

There is little doubt that connectivity will have to be the key theme at the BIMSTEC summit but here, too, is an Indian dilemma. The connectivity platform also opens the door to China selling its ambitious One Belt, One Road initiative among the members of this grouping. India's own resources are limited, but more than that its record of delivery on commitments continues to be abysmal. There are occasions when one finds the same projects reappearing as "fresh initiatives" in serial joint statements over recent years. Our capacities and institutions continue to lag behind our ambitions.

There is no doubt that the forthcoming summits will be major events and will reflect India's status as a key player in the region and as a globally significant player. But that will only be a transient gain unless we begin to pay attention to the much less glamorous and more nuts-and-bolts effort to use events as key markers in a well-conceived and systematic process of expanding our strategic space, leveraging our strengths and remedying our vulnerabilities. It is time to move from an event-oriented to a process-driven approach.

Shyam Saran is a former Foreign Secretary. He is currently Chairman, RIS, and Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/on-indias-diplomacy-at-the-brics-summit-in-goia/article9115819.ece?css=print>