EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

14-09-2026

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Female offspring of spotted hyena inherit rank, resources, a taste for power

A 'terrific' new study has found that the youngest female cub born to an alpha female inherits her mother's social status and also benefits from better access to food, allies, and breeding opportunities; over generations, these benefits accumulate, allowing a few privileged female lineages to produce more descendants

Kavi Bharathi R.
BENGALURU

Among people, it is common knowledge that privilege is often inherited. But according to new findings, hyenas also inherit resources and status, and not just their forebears' genes, from their parents.

The findings were published recently in *Science Advances* – and they challenge the traditional evolutionary theories that assume males always face greater reproductive competition.

In the animal kingdom, the males are generally considered to be the dominant sex. They are stronger and more competitive. But spotted hyenas buck this trend.

Scientists at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (Leibniz-IZW) in Berlin and the Institute of Evolutionary Science of Montpellier have found that in spotted hyenas, females dominate males not because they are bigger or stronger but because they have larger networks of social alliances.

The study also showed that female hyenas face more competition shaped by the inheritance of social rank across generations.

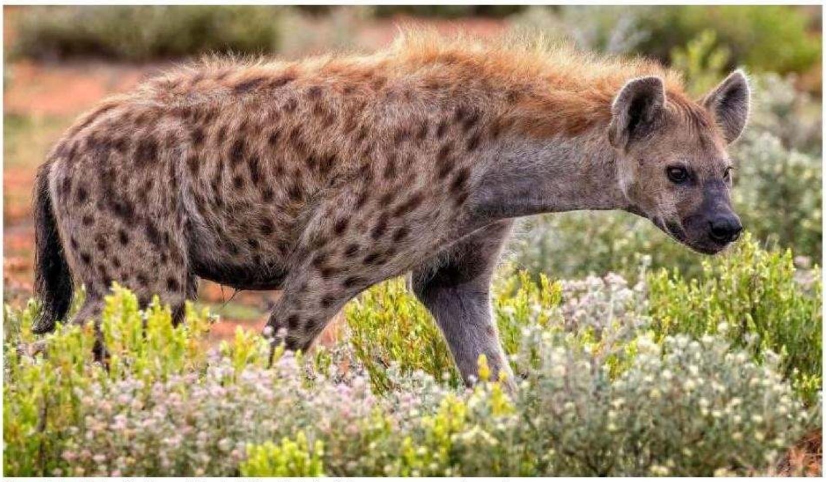
Alpha females

Marta Mosna, the lead author of the study and a researcher at Leibniz-IZW and the Ngorongoro Hyena Project, observed during her field visit in Africa that "male hyenas do not compete so much with each other". Instead, they were found spending their time following the alpha female, the highest-ranking female hyenas, around.

"The males follow them wherever the female goes," Ms. Mosna said. "They are staying close to her, spending a lot of time watching her, trying to connect with her, and trying to be friends with her."

On the other hand, the competition is more fierce among the females. "This is not really what you would expect for the classical sex role that Darwin-Bateman predicts," she said.

The Darwin-Bateman hypothesis proposes that reproductive inequality is greater among males. That is, between males and females, the males can father more offspring than females and this is why they compete more among themselves for access to mates. In mammals, the females also invest more in each reproductive event than males do – since they bear the physiological costs of pregnancy and lactation – they are more selective about mating. These predictions, formalised as the Darwin-Bateman paradigm, have been confirmed across many mammalian species.



Clan matriarch?: A spotted hyena in Etosha National Park, Namibia. SHARP PHOTOGRAPHY (CC BY-SA)

However, among spotted hyenas, the researchers found the females killing off the cubs of other females, despite all living in a matrilineal society in which the individuals were related to each other.

These and other observations supported the researchers' conclusion that the daughters of 'elite' families could build powerful family lineages over time – thus also challenging one of evolutionary biology's classic paradigms.

Clues in Lemala

For their study, the researchers studied hyenas belonging to eight resident clans in the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania. Their work spanned 29 years of data, eight generations, and 2,743 wild spotted hyenas.

The team used faecal samples to track paternity. These samples contained epithelial-rich mucus. "We need DNA information, which we normally take from the mucus around the faeces," Dr. Mosna said. "We need to look at the males and wait for him to defecate. And then, when he leaves, be sure that this was his poop to do paternity analysis."

"It is not always easy," she continued. "Sometimes they even defecate in the water, and then it is gone, or sometimes after they eat it is a bit too liquid – it is not very pleasant to put your hand on. It can also be a bit challenging, but fortunately, our field assistants are very well trained and very good with it."

For one clan that the team called 'Lemala', the researchers pieced together a 30-year genealogical tree and found that almost all the living members had descended from a single founding female lineage.

This led them to investigate how such extreme reproductive inequality could arise, which in turn led to the idea of the social inheritance of rank: since a mother's social position is passed to her female cub, it could give that lineage an advantage increasing across generations.

When nepotism pays

The youngest female cub born to an alpha female inherits her mother's social status and also benefits from better access to food, allies, and breeding opportunities. Over generations, these benefits accumulate, allowing a few privileged female lineages to produce more descendants.

"Inheriting the privilege ... means that you have better access to food and nutrition. They grow faster and survive longer. They also have a better position in the social network, which is also very important for hyenas," Ms. Mosna said.

"This research teaches us that nothing is fixed. Sex roles are not fixed, like how a male or a female should behave; how our society should behave is not fixed by genetics. Only social processes can actually change society in a meaningful way."

"This is a terrific paper that breaks a lot of new ground and serves as a powerful testament to the value of long-term field studies," Kay E. Holekamp, a Michigan State University distinguished professor who was not involved in it, said.

Beyond hyenas

The researchers are now exploring whether similar patterns of socially inherited reproductive inequality occur in other animal species.

They have said they also want to investigate whether female hyenas invest differently in male and female cubs depending on their social rank. High-ranking females may invest more in female cubs to pass on their privileged position while lower-ranking females may favour male cubs, Ms. Mosna said.

"This study has broad implications for how we understand animal societies: social structures can transmit advantages across generations and thereby shape competition, inequality, and evolutionary outcomes," Amiyaal Ilany of Tel Aviv University said.

"It also shows why inheritance should not be viewed as purely genetic. Socially inherited rank, relationships, and access to resources can have lasting effects on fitness and on the composition of future generations."

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THE GIST

- A team of researchers tracked 2,743 wild spotted hyenas across eight clans in Tanzania over 30 years, using DNA from mucus in faecal samples to determine paternity
- By building a 30-year genealogical tree for one clan, they found that nearly all living members descended from a single founding female lineage
- The researchers are now finding whether socially inherited reproductive inequality exists in other species and whether female hyenas invest differently in offspring based on rank

GS 3: INTERNAL SECURITY THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Terror's changing face, India's counter-terror strategy

Rajeev Agarwal

Retired colonel, Senior Research Consultant at CRF, Delhi and the author of the book, 'Between Tehran and Tel Aviv: Gaza's Story of Unending War'

The terror attack carried out by al-Qaeda on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001 was neither the first major terrorist attack in the world nor the first against the United States. But it fundamentally changed how terrorism would be fought in the decades that followed.

Over the past 25 years, the global security landscape, including that of India, has changed irreversibly. The forms of terrorism have evolved, the instruments used to perpetrate terror have changed, and so too have the strategies adopted by countries around the world to counter terrorism.

We no longer hear of large terror groups operating under ruthless terrorist leaders such as al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who led the Islamic State and called for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. Instead, terror groups have morphed into smaller, more autonomous entities. Lone-wolf attacks are becoming the norm, while technologies such as drones, cyber capabilities, and even artificial intelligence are being used not only by terror groups but also by nations combating terrorism.

From an Indian standpoint, 9/11 certainly helped bring greater attention to India's concerns over cross-border terrorism, particularly in Kashmir. However, it was not until the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks (November 2008) that the world truly stood in solidarity with India and acknowledged its fight against cross-border terrorism. Over the years, India's strategy towards terrorism has evolved – from a passive strategy of merely warning Pakistan but not punishing it, to a bold and active strategy that classifies any act of terrorism backed by support from across the border as an 'act of war'.

The starting years saw a passive response

Although cross-border terror commenced in Kashmir in early 1990s, the first major terror attack did not come from the Kashmir Valley. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam terror group of Sri Lanka on May 21, 1991 in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu shook the nation.

With no clearly defined counter-terror strategy and a rapidly expanding terror network in Kashmir, India found itself stretched. The March 1993 Mumbai serial blasts, which killed over 250 people in 13 coordinated blasts across the city, and the synchronised blasts across Coimbatore city (Tamil Nadu) in February 1998 exposed the inadequacies of India's internal security mechanisms to detect and fight terror inside the country.

However, the direct role of Pakistan was first exposed with the hijack of Indian Airlines flight IC-814, on December 24, 1999. Under tremendous public pressure and with very few options, India agreed to release dreaded Pakistan-based terrorists such as Ahmed Omar Sheikh and Masood Azhar in exchange for more than 160 civilian hostages. The attack on India's Parliament in New Delhi by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist group on December 13, 2001 outraged India and led to a large-scale military mobilisation under 'Operation Parakram'. With India and Pakistan having acquired nuclear weapons, the threat of escalation grew, prompting the international community to rush in to cool tempers. After almost two years of a tense standoff, the military disengagement took place without any direct punishment on Pakistan. The 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks – widely considered India's 9/11 moment – also did not lead to any military action against Pakistan.

India has moved from defensive restraint to proactive counter-terrorism

There were other terror attacks too, such as the 2002 Akshardham Temple attack, the 2006 Varanasi serial bomb blasts, and the 2010 German Bakery blast in Pune. Delhi, too, was not left untouched by terror. Even before the Parliament attack, an Army garrison within the Red Fort was targeted on December 22, 2000 by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists, resulting in the deaths of three soldiers. In October 2005, over 60 people were killed in serial blasts that rocked popular Delhi markets, including Sarojini Nagar and Paharganj. Again, in September 2008, months before the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, multiple blasts rocked commercial areas of Delhi, including Connaught Place, Greater Kailash, and Karol Bagh. On September 7, 2011, a briefcase bomb exploded outside the Delhi High Court, killing 15 people. The attack was claimed by Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami (HUJI), a terror group affiliated with al-Qaeda and largely based in Pakistan. In all these cases, and many others, India chose not to respond directly and decisively, even after conclusive proof of Pakistan's direct support for these attacks. How and when, then, did India change its strategy?

Taking the fight across the border

It was after a change of government at the Centre in May 2014, and its resolve not to let terror go unpunished, that India changed its strategy towards cross-border terrorism. The terror attack on September 18, 2016 by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorists on an Army camp in Uri, Kashmir, led to the first cross-border surgical strikes (September 28-29). The strikes not only sent a strong message but also served as a clear statement of intent. Soon thereafter, following the terror attack on a Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Pulwama, Kashmir, on February 14, 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) launched strikes on a JeM terror camp in Balakot. This marked the first time that the IAF had crossed into Pakistani airspace to carry out a strike against a terror target.

However, it was the terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025 that outraged the nation like never before. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was on a visit to Saudi Arabia, returned to India and soon after, the Indian armed forces launched Operation Sindoor on May 6-7, hitting the heart of the Pakistan-based terror network. In a matter of 96 hours, the leaders and headquarters of the terror networks (LeT and JeM) were destroyed and Pakistani military assets were pulverised.

Where India stands on terror now

India has come a long way since the menace of cross-border terrorism took root in Kashmir in the early 1990s. From a passive and reactive policy, India has emerged as a leading voice in the global fight against terrorism. Soon after Operation Sindoor, India declared three clear intentions – first, that the era of restraint and patience is over, and Pakistan will have to pay a direct and heavy price for any terror attack in the future. Second, that any future act of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan will be treated as an 'act of war'. Third, that Pakistani nuclear blackmail will no longer be a restraining factor.

India also unveiled 'PRAHAAR', its first comprehensive National Counter-Terrorism Policy and Strategy, on February 23, 2026. The policy provides a national counter-terrorism framework for preventing and responding to terrorist activities and radicalisation through coordinated "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" approaches.

Although the number of terror-related incidents in Kashmir has declined drastically, the possibility of a few terrorists infiltrating across the Line of Control (LoC) and evading intelligence and security agencies remains. The answer lies in a four-fold strategy. First, continue to hunt down and eliminate the remnants of the terror network in the country, particularly in Kashmir. Second, take pre-emptive military action against any potential terror threat building across the LoC, including at terrorist launch pads. With years of experience and a deeply embedded intelligence network, this is possible. Third, undertake an exhaustive de-radicalisation programme across the country that not only motivates young people to join the mainstream but also makes the prospect of joining or supporting a terror outfit unattractive and prohibitively costly. Fourth, take all necessary steps to cut off terror financing, in close coordination with friendly countries.

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the threat of terrorism across the globe has not been eliminated but has instead morphed into new forms. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Bishkek on September 1, Mr. Modi called out the double standards on terrorism and said, "We must send a strong message to countries that use terrorism as an instrument of policy and provide safe haven and support to terrorists that terrorism can never be a strategic asset for anyone." At the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi, an exclusive paragraph on the Pahalgam terror attack was included in the Delhi Declaration, clearly underscoring the growing global consensus on combating terrorism.

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Pakistan's westward turn — strategic depth or overstretch

The defence cooperation agreement signed by Pakistan and Kuwait on August 27, 2026, is the latest manifestation of Pakistan's rapidly expanding strategic footprint in West Asia. The agreement assumes greater significance when viewed alongside Pakistan's membership of the Saudi Arabia-Türkiye-Pakistan defence arrangement and its recent role as an intermediary between Iran and the United States.

Mohammed Ayoob

University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University, and the author of 'From Regional Security to Global IR' (2024)

Enduring links

Pakistan's West Asian orientation has deep historical roots. From its inception, it attempted to combine its South Asian geopolitical identity with that of a major Muslim power. During the Cold War, Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye were linked through the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and subsequently through the Regional Cooperation for Development.

The decisive turn towards the Arab world came after Pakistan's defeat and dismemberment in 1971. It sought to compensate for its diminished position in South Asia by emphasising its Islamic identity, symbolised by the Islamic summit held in Lahore in 1974. Pakistan simultaneously developed extensive military relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies.

What is new, therefore, is not Pakistan's involvement in West Asia but its increasing institutionalisation. The Makkah Agreement of August 7 stipulated that an armed attack against one member would be regarded as an attack against all. The three countries moved quickly to give the arrangement institutional substance. At the August 31 meeting in Istanbul, their Foreign and Defence Ministers and military chiefs decided to establish a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia, with a Pakistani serving as its first Secretary-General for three years. They also agreed to strengthen military interoperability and pursue defence-industrial cooperation, including joint technology development and production.

Pakistan's expanding West Asian role brings influence and opportunity, but also strategic risks

But the new arrangement is already confronting Pakistan with the contradictions inherent in its expanding West Asian role. Renewed Houthi missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia created the first serious test of the Makkah pact. The Houthis' recent capture of Mocha port and Perim island have further added to their capability to choke off Saudi shipping through the Bab al-Mandab. With the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed by Iran, a frustrated Saudi Arabia may re-launch a full-fledged war against the Houthis. This could create a major dilemma for Pakistan especially if Riyadh decides to invoke the collective-defence provision of the Makkah agreement.

Pakistan wants to be Saudi Arabia's security partner, Türkiye's strategic ally, Iran's friend and interlocutor, Washington's useful intermediary, and an increasingly important security provider to the Gulf monarchies. These roles are compatible when regional tensions are manageable. They become irreconcilable when they are not.

What it means for India

For India, Pakistan's westward turn presents both a challenge and a potential relief. A Pakistan embedded in a network of West Asian security relationships may acquire defence in depth. Saudi financial resources, Turkish defence technology and Pakistan's expanding relationships with Gulf militaries can theoretically increase Islamabad's resilience in a confrontation with India. Türkiye is already Pakistan's most vocal major supporter on Kashmir. Pakistan's nuclear status also enhances its strategic value to Arab states concerned about an increasingly unstable regional order because of nuclear-armed Israel's aggressive policies.

But strategic depth can easily become strategic overstretch. Pakistan's security establishment has historically concentrated overwhelmingly on India. A Pakistan increasingly required to devote diplomatic, military and intelligence resources to Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Yemen and the Red Sea may have fewer resources to concentrate on India.

The current Saudi-Houthi confrontation and the distinct possibility of it spawning a war clearly demonstrate the danger of Pakistan's strategic overstretch. The deeper Pakistan becomes embedded in West Asian security arrangements, the harder it will become to remain aloof from the region's conflicts. If the Houthi-Saudi confrontation escalates, Islamabad may eventually have to choose between honouring the credibility of its collective-defence commitments and maintaining its carefully cultivated relationship with Tehran, the Houthis' principal ally.

India should therefore resist interpreting Pakistan's growing West Asian role in purely negative terms. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the other Gulf states have major economic and strategic relationships with India that they are unlikely to sacrifice for Pakistan. New Delhi should continue deepening these relationships as a counter to Pakistan's expanding footprint in West Asia.

The consolidation of Pakistan's West Asian relationships undoubtedly provides it with greater strategic depth *vis-à-vis* India. But those very relationships expose it to some of the world's most combustible rivalries. For India, therefore, Pakistan's westward turn contains a paradox. A Pakistan more deeply embedded in a West Asian security structure may in theory look strategically stronger. But a Pakistan entangled in mutually contradictory West Asian commitments will soon discover that it could be indefinitely stuck in a quagmire of its own choosing. It is far more difficult to get off the tiger than to get on it.

At BRICS, India must bank on the NDB

India should use BRICS to maximise the grouping's potential without strengthening Beijing, with the New Development Bank offering a practical avenue for cooperation; strengthening the NDB through greater capital, membership and local-currency lending can make BRICS more relevant

ECONOMIC NOTES

Amit Kumar
Anushka Saxena

On September 12, leaders of the BRICS grouping gathered at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, with India holding the chair and, by extension, the pen. When BRICS came together in 2011, its five members contributed 20% of global GDP but held just 11% of the voting share at the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Today, the expanded grouping accounts for nearly 40% of global GDP and 55% of the world's population, but the voting share has barely expanded.

Beyond that grievance, BRICS does not, and will never, possess a coherent geopolitical identity. Russia, China and Iran would like it to be anti-West, while India, Brazil and South Africa insist it is better understood as non-West. Given these divergences and the importance of the India-U.S. ties, Delhi cannot lend itself to the Beijing-Moscow de-dollarisation crusade. Not only would that add fuel to the fire at a time when ties with Washington are already strained, but it would also be an unsustainable proposition to advocate in the medium term.

India's approach to BRICS has to conform to the broader constraints and contradictions that its membership poses – maximising the grouping's potential without strengthening Beijing's overall strategic position. Within these constraints, there are still possibilities to keep the grouping relevant.

Making the NDB count

One area where BRICS can contribute the most meaningfully to the global financial order, without overtly threatening or challenging American predominance, is by expanding the efficiency and membership of the New Development Bank (NDB). Established by the BRICS countries in 2015 to "mobilise resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging markets and developing countries," the bank remains one of the grouping's most tangible tools.

Yet, despite a decade in operation, the NDB has approved only 139 projects worth about $43 billion, distributed mostly among its core members. Its like-for-like counterpart, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), established around the same time, has meanwhile gathered 111 approved members and committed about $69 billion across 350 projects, backed by a AAA credit rating that the NDB cannot easily attain. Stagnant asset growth continues to restrict its lending capacity. This is coupled with an exceptionally slow disbursement rate; only about $20 billion of approved loans had been disbursed, according to the bank's own count.

Breaking the asset bottleneck

One pathway to breaking this asset bottleneck would be for the five countries to increase their paid-up capital. However, severe domestic and geopolitical constraints mean that not all founders can match higher commitments – most notably, Russia, which is heavily sanctioned. Sanctions have also strained the bank's credit standing and dollar funding costs. What is ironic is that even as Moscow and Beijing champion de-dollarisation, including through the Bank, the NDB has extended no new credit to Russia since March 2022 to protect its AA/AA+ credit rating. And since the bank's rules mandate equal voting shares among the founders, any capital expansion is effectively held hostage by its financially weakest link. The NDB has also opened its doors to new members, allowing for a fresh infusion of capital, but the founders' collective voting share cannot fall below 55%.

Regardless of how the bottleneck is resolved, there is merit in reprioritising the NDB within BRICS. So far, the bank has served Delhi well. It has secured commitments of nearly $10 billion across 32 projects, including metro rail systems and the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor. It is not a small feat, but expanding the NDB's operations to be on par with other multilateral lenders would require extending such a bargain to many more emerging markets and developing countries.

It is also a noteworthy strength of the NDB that it has a marked preference for local-currency lending. This mechanism appeals to emerging economies, especially at a time when the volatility in foreign-exchange markets is sustained because of global wars, both military and economic. It is an alternative way to reduce reliance on the dollar without replacing it as a currency for trade invoicing. The bank's 2022-26 General Strategy commits to 30% of its lending and borrowing in member countries' local currencies, even as the bulk of its lending and borrowing remains in dollars. Whatever local currency lending does exist is skewed heavily in favour of the Renminbi – just a few days ago, the NDB priced a ¥7 billion (~$1.04 billion) three-year Panda bond in the China Interbank bond market. In 2026, issuance of such bonds has gone up approximately 91% year-on-year, per Chinese data.

Pushing the rupee bond

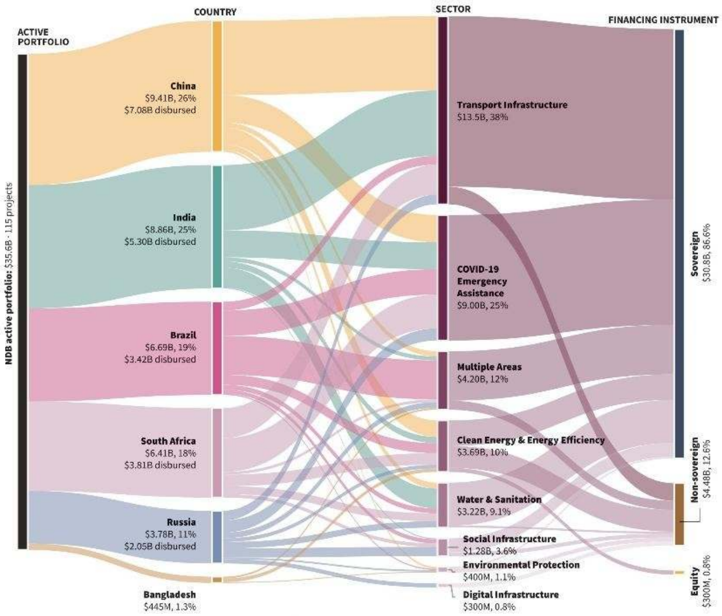
It is time for India to push the long-delayed rupee bond over the line. First discussed in 2016, and subsequently slated for October 2023 and then for end-March 2026, the debut issuance was described by NDB President Dilma Rousseff in May as being at its "final stage," two months after the bank floated a rupee bond programme to mobilise around ₹25,000 crore over five years. Further, given the fact that the 2026 New Delhi Declaration did not feature a meaningful agreement on mobilising the NDB, India's focus in BRICS next year should be on simpler fixes to local-currency challenges.

Unlike the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, whose Summit recently concluded with bare-minimum outcomes, BRICS has tangible economic tools and a wider membership than ever before. In a world drifting towards subscription multilateralism, with Washington's pay-to-shape-the-rules Board of Peace as its latest specimen, these arrangements are the only way the grouping will truly set itself apart.

(Amit Kumar and Anushka Saxena are researchers at the Takshashila Institution. Views are personal to the authors and do not represent those of the Institution. Graphic Data Source: NDB; Investor Presentation June 2026 & Annual Report 2025; created by the authors)

Where the money flows

China and India together account for 51% of the New Development Bank's active portfolio, while transport infrastructure takes the largest share



This portfolio excludes loan amounts repaid and projects cancelled. NDB has approved $43.0 billion across 139 projects in total since 2015; the difference is 24 projects and about $7.4 billion that have been fully repaid or cancelled. Interior country-by-sector flows are estimated and scaled to NDB's published totals

The 18th BRICS Summit concluded on Sunday, in New Delhi. AP

THE GIST

BRICS' growing economic and demographic weight has not been matched by greater influence at institutions such as the IMF, while divisions among members prevent it from developing a coherent geopolitical identity

The NDB remains one of BRICS' most tangible economic instruments, but its lending and disbursement have lagged behind the AIIB, with weak asset growth and constraints arising from sanctions on Russia and the bank's voting structure

India should push for the long-delayed rupee bond and focus on practical local-currency measures, while using the NDB to extend development finance to more emerging markets and developing countries

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

India & China are at a Nash equilibrium. Will it hold — that's the question

KANTI BAJPAI

ARE WE any the wiser about the course of India-China relations after the Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus statement on the border issued on August 25 and the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the just-concluded BRICS Summit?

What the August statement and the two readouts from India and China after the summit indicate is that, with respect to the border, the two sides are at a Nash equilibrium. For the Economics 101-challenged like me, a Nash equilibrium is an outcome in a non-cooperative game in which "no player's expected outcome can be improved by changing one's own strategy" (according to Britannica online). In essence, India and China, at least tacitly, recognise that in any foreseeable future they cannot aspire to and achieve a better position in the border quarrel. They may well spar diplomatically and militarily occasionally, as they have since 2013. But the intermittent war of words and of hardware over control of the high Himalaya can only move the Line of Actual Control slightly.

The border quarrel can only be solved to the maximal satisfaction of India and China by negotiation or by force. India and China have been negotiating a border deal almost without interruption since 1981 — the Secretary/Vice Minister-level talks (1981-88), the Joint Working Group (1989-2005), and the Special Representative Mechanism (2003-present). Over more than 45 years, they have met once a year on average.

After all those years of talking, the only agreement of substance is the 2005 "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question". The most important parameters and guidelines were that a settlement would be reached as a package (nothing is settled until everything on the border is settled). The final agreement would be a "political settlement" that would consider strategic concerns, history, national sentiment, practicality, geography, and the interests of settled populations in the borderlands.

The August 2026 eight-point statement, enjoining the negotiators to seek an early and substantial harvest with respect to the border, does not violate the idea of a package deal. Rather, it suggests that the two sides should focus on success in one area instead of negotiating everything everywhere all at once. Having achieved success in one section, they should then move on to another section of the border. Yet, as per the 2005 agreement, each sectional success would only be finally accepted and ratified when the entire border is settled.

Nothing in the Modi-Xi BRICS readouts alters the basic 2005 agreement or the eight-point early harvest statement. The negotiation process has been somewhat nudged by the eight-point statement, but it is hard to imagine that diplomatic bargaining now or in the future can give India or China their maximal objective. For India, the maximal objective is to get back Aksai Chin up to its original claim and to keep everything it has in the other sectors. For China, it is to get Arunachal Pradesh all the way to the southern slopes (which is most of the state) and to keep everything else it has in the other sectors. It is inconceivable that Indian or Chinese negotiators can achieve their maximal objectives.

Nor can they do so by force. India cannot conquer Aksai Chin up to its original claim line, and China cannot conquer Arunachal Pradesh up to the southern slopes. Terrain, climate, logistics, and military defences make any dramatic — and lasting — military gains almost impossible. Short of extremely bad strategy by their commanders or internal political chaos that distracts from deterrence, the status quo on the border is stable.

> Two things can disturb the Nash equilibrium (apart from bad defence or internal political collapse): The transition to a successor Dalai Lama, and an India-Pakistan fight that draws China directly in

Two things can disturb the Nash equilibrium (apart from bad defence or internal political collapse): The transition to a successor Dalai Lama, and an India-Pakistan fight that draws China directly in and leads to a two-front war for India.

Eventually, Beijing will appoint its preferred Dalai Lama. The Tibetans will almost certainly choose their own. New Delhi will be caught in the middle. India-China tensions could consequently spiral, and China could lash out as it did in 1962 when the instabilities in Tibet were a factor leading to war.

Alternatively, another India-Pakistan fight could spiral. In 2025, New Delhi detected a Chinese helping hand to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor. In a future South Asian confrontation, China might be more ostensively involved. New Delhi or Beijing may then find themselves drawn into a fight that would threaten the status quo.

Beyond the border negotiations and all the other good things that the present détente with China promises — trade, visas, supply chain resilience, river water cooperation — New Delhi should be thinking about the strategic challenges that could disturb the current Nash equilibrium. Can India-China relations be insulated from a Tibet transition and a future India-Pakistan fight? Can the fruits of détente help build sufficient insulation? What more needs to be done with China?

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