



Address by External Affairs Minister at the inaugural session of BRICS Academic Forum

3 August 2021

Dr Samir Saran, Dr Sachin Chaturvedi, Dear friends,

1. In 2021, BRICS turns 15. In human terms, this is young adulthood, with thoughts shaped and a world view concretised, and with a growing sense of responsibilities. As such, India's presidency of BRICS comes at such an inflection point for this grouping.

2. But the context is important for the global system as well. This is most tellingly felt in the pandemic that has devastated economies and societies. The juncture then is pregnant with challenges as well as opportunities. The role of the BRICS countries, of the ideas, strategies and policies they contribute, has never been so apparent.

3. The birth of BRICS was an implicit recognition that the post-war order had peaked. Emerging economies needed to step up to craft a new developmental framework. Each of us was well placed to do this, to share our experiences – in some measures or the other – with partner countries of but not limited to the global South. We intuitively understood that the dominance moment at the end of the Cold War could not be sustained. BRICS was a response to the search for diversity; in many ways, it was an accurate anticipation of multipolarity.

4. So, let us therefore remember that counter-dominance instinct and principled commitment to multipolarity in all forms – political and economic, academic and institutional, social and cultural – is written into the DNA of BRICS. It was in this spirit of independence and complementarity that India co-founded BRICS. We are confident that this sentiment will continue to define not just BRICS but the larger template for coming decades of the 21st century. BRICS is a statement of global rebalancing that underlines its essential diversity and pluralism.

5. Now, India's presidency of BRICS is underpinned by four pillars – reform of the multilateral system; counter-terrorism cooperation; technological and digital solutions for Sustainable Development Goals; and enhancing P2P (people to people) cooperation. These pillars may seem abstract or even perennial, but each one of them actually has an explicit, real-world meaning.

6. An updating and recalibration of the post-World War II multilateral architecture cannot be postponed any further. The pandemic and the normative breakdown in its wake have rudely reminded us that institutions built to tackle problems of the 1940s desperately need to be upgraded and made fit-for-purpose for our century.



7. An expansion of the permanent membership of the Security Council is a necessary ingredient. But by itself it is not sufficient. Multilateral institutions have been disadvantaged by structural inertia, competitive gridlocks, uneven resourcing and skewed navigation. The proliferation of new and smaller platforms, including of plurilateral and regional groups, is therefore a response to such felt gaps. BRICS itself was actually among the earliest in this regard. Too often, we obsess with one or the other response; more effort and action is actually required to fill the gaps.

8. Terrorism thrives in some of these gaps. Its nursery lies in conflict-ridden spaces made fertile for radicalisation by malign players, including states. The transition in Afghanistan that we are seeing today and the warfare that has yet again been forced upon its people has sharpened this challenge. Left unattended, its edge will be deeply felt not just in Afghanistan's neighbourhood but well beyond. We are therefore all stakeholders in the quest for a clear, coordinated and undifferentiated response to terrorism. In the 21st century, legitimacy cannot be derived from mass violence, brutal intimidation or covert agendas. Representation, inclusion, peace and stability are inextricably linked.

9. Emerging technologies, most strikingly digital technology and the energies of the Internet, are a force multiplier in any avenue of human endeavour. As we have learnt to our cost, these can also become an instrument for sources of extremism and motivated misinformation. For us in India, digital tools have proved invaluable in pushing back the pandemic. In the year-and-a-half of living and coping with the Covid-19, they have accelerated contact tracing, vaccine delivery, online and mobile-based diagnosis; and targeted delivery of welfare. India's 800/400 accomplishment i.e. food rations for 800 million people and cash transfers to 400 million – has been streamlined by digitally-enabled technology. The surge in online education has also been noteworthy.

10. Many of these empirical experiences will stay with us beyond the pandemic. For example, the catalytic implications of technology in the realisation of SDGs are there for us to recognise. The pandemic has demanded a price in terms of economic growth and has challenged SDG timelines. Technology could help us now recover ground and time. India is optimistic on this score, and ready to share what it has harnessed, innovated and learnt in these last years.

11. Finally, we come to our people – the principal and most essential stakeholders of BRICS, and in fact of our larger developmental enterprise. The past years has made more of us alive to the limitations of an economic model that posits efficiency and pricing as antithetical to people and community or indeed to livelihoods and sustainability. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for a human-centric globalisation was not just a recognition of pandemic-induced distortions, but in fact of broader inequities. Welfare and well-being of people, families and communities cannot be divorced from the global reset and resilience that is occurring in the long tail of Covid-19.



12. A case in point is the imbalance between the emphasis on IPR in the pharmaceutical industry and the meeting of public health goals. Left untouched, the current practices will only delay the elimination of the pandemic by several years. This is simply not acceptable. But beyond health is a larger economic lesson for the world from the pandemic. The creation of more reliable and resilient supply chains is vital to infuse greater confidence in the global economy and in fact to de-risk it from future pandemics. The global South is particularly vulnerable in that regard. Investments must diversify to provide a certain assurance of sustainability – for livelihoods, for families and communities, and of course for the natural environment.

13. During the course of the year, on the road to this BRICS Academic Forum, scholars from universities and think tanks have deliberated on such issues – specifically on global health, the future of work, climate change, global economic recovery, green energy, trade, and digital public goods, and women-led economic growth. This conference represents the culmination of a rich and substantial intellectual exercise. I look forward to policy prescriptions that can make BRICS more effective and our world more secure. Those two aspirations are symbiotic. A world at peace with itself – across domains – will add to BRICS capacities. And enhanced BRICS capabilities will contribute surely to global well-being.

So I thank you once again, and I convey all the best for the rest of the Forum.

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