
LKI *Policy Briefs* are extended analyses on policy issues.

Between Giants: Sri Lanka's BRICS Dilemma

Venura Jayaratne
May 2026

Abstract - Sri Lanka formally applied for BRICS membership at the October 2024 Kazan Summit under the Dissanayake government. The application was not taken up in the January 2025 partner state selections, and Brazil's BRICS presidency has indicated that further expansion will be assessed case by case. This study asks whether the bid is tenable, what form of association is realistic, and what the foreign policy consequences of different outcomes would be. The study draws on qualitative desk-based analysis of official BRICS documentation, small state foreign policy scholarship, and published expert commentary. It argues that full membership is not tenable in the short to medium term. Three constraints account for this: the expansion process is on hold, India's political support for a Sri Lankan bid is uncertain, and Sri Lanka's active IMF Extended Fund Facility imposes costs the current economic recovery cannot absorb. Sri Lanka's existing NDB membership is the most concrete near-term form of BRICS engagement available. Partner state status in a future round is the next realistic step, contingent on diplomatic groundwork not yet completed. The study applies hedging theory and Sri Lanka's non-aligned foreign policy tradition as its analytical lens, with comparative reference points from Bangladesh, Vietnam, and the UAE. Five policy recommendations address NDB engagement, partner state positioning, India relationship management, membership deferral, and the public framing of non-alignment.

Keywords: BRICS, Sri Lanka, Non-alignment, Hedging, Small state foreign policy, Strategic autonomy, New Development Bank, Partner State, India-China competition, Global South

Venura Jayaratne is a Research Intern at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI) in Colombo. He has a Diploma in International Relations (BCIS) and is currently reading for a BA in Social Sciences at Open University of Sri Lanka and the Diploma in Diplomacy and World Affairs at the BIDTI. The opinions in this Policy Brief are the author's own and not the institutional views of LKI. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the position of any other institutions or individual with which the author is affiliated.

Between Giants: Sri Lanka's BRICS dilemma

Venura Jayaratne*

Table of Contents

Abbreviations.....	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Literature Review.....	11
3. Conceptual framework	13
4. Research design and methodology	15
5. Assessing the tenability of Sri Lanka's BRICS bid.....	16
6. Benefits and risks: A structured assessment.....	18
7. Foreign policy implications	20
8. Comparative reference points.....	23
9. Policy recommendations	24
10. Conclusion	26
References	28

Abbreviations

BRICS	– Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (and expanded members)
BRIC	– Brazil, Russia, India, China,
IMF	– International Monetary Fund
EU	– European Union
NDB	– New Development Bank
CRA	– Contingent Reserve Arrangement
SWIFT	– Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UN	– United Nations
SAARC	– South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
IORA	– Indian Ocean Rim Association
BIMSTEC	– Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
GSP+	– Generalized System of Preferences Plus (EU trade scheme)
G6	– Group of Six (France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, US — the six largest developed economies referenced in O'Neill's 2001 BRIC projection as the benchmark for BRIC growth; precursor to the G7)
G7	– Group of Seven (G6 plus Canada)
G20	– Group of Twenty (major economies)
NAM	– Non-Aligned Movement
WTO	– World Trade Organization
LKIIRSS	– Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies
ASEAN	– Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EPRS	– European Parliament Research Service
ISDP	– Institute for Security and Development Policy
UAE	– United Arab Emirates
UK	– United Kingdom
US	– United States

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

In October 2024, Sri Lanka formally submitted its application for BRICS membership at the Kazan Summit, making it one of the dozens of states that have expressed interest in joining the grouping since its landmark expansion in August 2023. The Dissanayake government framed the application as an assertion of sovereign independence and a statement of openness to non-Western partnerships (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2024). The move attracted significant domestic and regional attention, not least because Sri Lanka was simultaneously operation under an IMF Extended Fund Facility, managing a fragile economic recovery from the worst financial crisis in its post-independence history, and navigating the enduring India-China rivalry for influence in the Indian Ocean.

The timing alone makes Sri Lanka's BRICS bid analytically interesting. Most small states that have sought BRICS association are in a position of relative economic stability or have fewer competing institutional dependencies. Sri Lanka is in neither position. It is, at the same moment, a debtor to Western-backed creditors, a beneficiary of EU trade preferences, a close security partner of India, and a state with deep Chinese infrastructure investment. Formally joining a grouping that is widely read internationally as an institutional counterweight to Western-led order creates a set of tensions that the existing scholarship has not been deeply examined for any South Asian State.

BRICS itself has changed significantly since its origins as an investment analyst's acronym. What began in 2001 as Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill's shorthand for the four fastest-growing emerging markets (Goldman Sachs, 2001; Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003), and became a formal diplomatic club with annual summits from 2009, expanded in 2011 with South Africa's formal accession and again from January 2024, when Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE joined as full members following invitations at the Johannesburg II Summit in August 2023. Indonesia joined as a full member in January 2025. Saudi Arabia received the same 2023 invitation but had not formally accepted membership at the time of writing, a position that reflects its ongoing strategic balancing between China and the United States. In its confirmed membership configuration, the grouping accounts for over 35% of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms and more than 40% of the world's population (BRICS Brazil, 2025).

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's application becomes a test case for how small, economically constrained, non-aligned states in the Global South navigate the competing institutional claims of a genuinely multipolar world. The analysis this study offers applies beyond Sri Lanka, but it is grounded in Sri Lanka's specific situation: its colonial history, its non-aligned foreign policy tradition, its Indian Ocean geography, and its current economic constraints.

1.2 The membership application

Sri Lanka's BRICS application followed a period of intensive diplomatic signaling. The Dissanayake government, which came to power in September 2024 on a platform of economic sovereignty and non-alignment, moved quickly to position Sri Lanka as an active participant in the emerging multipolar order. The Foreign Minister's office issued letters to counterparts in all current BRICS member states, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the application's submission at the Kazan Summit in October 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2024).

The Kazan Summit was significant for a second reason. It was at Kazan that the partner state category was formally introduced as an intermediate membership tier, giving aspirant states structured access to BRICS processes without the political weight of full membership. The first nine partner states, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan, were confirmed from January 2025. Sri Lanka was not among them. The Brazilian BRICS presidency subsequently indicated that no further expansion was under consideration at that time, and that expressions of interest would be assessed on a case-by-case basis when conditions allow (BRICS Brazil, 2025).

This outcome is the starting point for the study's analysis. Sri Lanka has applied and was not selected even at the partner state level. That is a specific diplomatic situation that requires specific analysis, not simply a general assessment of BRICS membership pros and cons.

1.3 Purpose and Scope of the study

This study addresses five questions:

- First, is Sri Lanka's BRICS membership bid tenable, both formally and politically, given the current state of the grouping and the positions of its existing members?
- Second, what form of BRICS association, full membership, partner state status, or NDB engagement, is most realistic for Sri Lanka in the near term, and why?
- Third, what are the principal economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical benefits and risks of BRICS association for Sri Lanka under current conditions?
- Fourth, what would different levels of BRICS engagement mean for Sri Lanka's specific bilateral relationships, particularly with India, China, the United States, and the European Union?
- Fifth, does Sri Lanka's nonaligned foreign policy tradition, and the strategic autonomy it is designed to protect, remain viable alongside BRICS association in any of its forms?

1.4 Significance of research

The study makes four contributions to existing knowledge. It offers a focused analysis of Sri Lanka's BRICS membership bid, enriching the emerging literature on aspirant BRICS states. It assesses the "partner state" pathway as a realistic option for small aspirant states, a category that the literature has not yet examined in depth. It identifies and analyses the interaction between IMF conditionality and BRICS membership aspirations in Sri Lanka, shedding light on an analytically consequential tension that has received limited attention in the scholarship, and it applies Goh's (2007) hedging framework to the BRICS question in the Sri Lankan context, showing how different forms of association would affect the hedging equilibrium that has defined Colombo's foreign policy orientation for decades.

The intended audience is dual: academic readers working in international relations, South Asian studies, BRICS scholarship, policy practitioners and analysts within Sri Lanka's foreign policy community.

1.5 History and evolution of BRICS

1.5.1 From acronym to institution

BRICS did not begin as a political project. Jim O'Neill, then Head of Global Economic Research at Goldman Sachs, coined the acronym BRIC in a 2001 research paper titled "Building Better Global Economic BRICs", and elaborated it in a 2003 follow-up, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050." (Goldman Sachs, 2001; Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003) The analytical claim was straightforward: Brazil, Russia, India, and China, were growing fast enough that by 2050 their combined economies would exceed those of the G6. The term was an investment-analyst's shorthand, a grouping by projected trajectory rather than by geography, ideology, or political affiliation.

O'Neill himself later argued that BRICS "serves no real purpose beyond generating symbolic gestures and lofty rhetoric" as a formal political body (O'Neill, 2024). The irony is that the acronym he coined to describe an economic projection became the name of one of the most discussed inter-governmental platforms of the twenty-first century. Goldman Sachs's framing reached policymakers in the four capitals, who found it in useful vocabulary for a political project that had been forming independently.

The intellectual predecessor to formal BRICS cooperation was the concept of a Russia-India-China triangle advanced by Yevgeny Primakov, who served first as Russia's Foreign Minister (1996 to 1998) and subsequently as Prime Minister (1998 to 1999). Primakov formally proposed the triangle during his December 1998 visit to New Delhi, by which point he was serving as Prime Minister. His vision was explicitly geopolitical: a tripolar arrangement among three major non-Western powers that could counterbalance American unipolarity (Stuenkel, 2020).

1.5.2 Institutional formation, 2006 to 2010

BRIC became a formal diplomatic grouping in 2006, when the foreign ministers of Brazil, Russia, India and China met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Annual summits began in 2009, with the first held in Yekaterinburg, Russia (Stuenkel, 2020). The founding agenda was modest: coordination on global economic governance, calls for reform of the international financial institutions, and a shared assertion that the existing multilateral order underrepresented the interests of large developing economies.

South Africa's accession in 2011, which added the S and produced the current acronym, was partly political (Stuenkel, 2020). South Africa had been invited in December 2010 and formally joined at the third BRICS summit in Sanya, China, in April 2011. South Africa's economy was significantly smaller than those of the original four members and its GDP share of global output was modest relative to the grouping's self-image as an emerging economy bloc, but its admission gave BRICS an African member, extended the grouping's geographic representation, and signaled that the club's identity was as much about political positioning as economic scale.

1.5.3 Institutional deepening; the NDB and the CRA

The period from 2012 to 2016 saw BRICS move from a diplomatic talking shop toward institutional substance, to which two mechanisms were central. The New Development Bank, established by the Agreement on the New Development Bank signed at the Fortaleza summit in 2014 (Stuenkel, 2020) and headquartered in Shanghai, was designed to fund infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS member states and, subsequently, in a wider membership that extends to non-BRICS states. The NDB governance structure gives each founding member equal voting rights, an explicit rejection of the weighted voting models that give the United States and European states disproportionate influence in the IMF and World Bank. Sri Lanka became an NDB member in 2024, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2024) accessing this financing channel without holding BRICS membership. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement, agreed at the same summit, established a framework for mutual financial support among BRICS's central banks in times of balance of payments stress. The CRA was designed as an alternative to IMF emergency lending and as a signal that BRICS could develop credible financial safety nets outside Western-dominated institutional architecture. In practice, the CRA has been less active than anticipated: its conditionality requirements and disbursement mechanisms have not been fully developed, and no member state has made significant use of it.

1.5.4 Economic weight and global footprint

BRICS's collective economic presence shifted substantially over the two decades between O'Neill's original paper and the 2024 expansion. In 1990, the original four BRIC economies together accounted for roughly 10% of global GDP and approximately 4% of world trade (Stuenkel, 2020). By the mid-2020s, the expanded BRICS grouping accounts for over 25% of world GDP at market exchange rates and approximately 40% in purchasing power parity terms, alongside approximately 26% of global trade, up from roughly 18% in the early 2000s (BRICS Brazil, 2025). The trajectory represents more than 150% growth in the grouping's share of the world economy over three decades.

This growth reflects different dynamics in different member states. China's rise is the dominant story: its economy expanded from roughly 4% of global GDP in 2000 to over 18% by the mid-2020s (Goldman Sachs, 2001; BRICS Brazil, 2025). India has grown consistently but from a lower base. Russia's economy contracted significantly after 2022 sanctions. Brazil and South Africa have grown more slowly than originally projected. The internal economic divergence within BRICS is consequential: it means the grouping's aggregate statistics overstate its coherence, and that China's economic weight within the grouping is disproportionate relative to any other member.

1.5.5. The 2023 expansion: Logic and composition

The Johannesburg II Declaration in August 2023 announced the largest BRICS expansion since South Africa's formal accession in 2011 (BRICS, 2023a). Six countries were invited: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Argentina formally declined the invitation in December 2023 under President Javier Milei. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE

joined as full members from January 2024. Saudi Arabia received the invitation but had not formally accepted membership at the time of writing. Indonesia, which had been offered membership at Johannesburg but asked to delay pending its 2024 presidential election, formally joined in January 2025 under the Brazilian BRICS presidency.

China's interest in expansion was strategic: a larger BRICS with broader Global South representation strengthened the grouping's claim to speak for the developing world and provided institutional cover for China's preference for a world order less organized around American power. India's position was more cautious. New Delhi supported expansion in principle but resisted moves that would give China disproportionate influence over the grouping's direction, and it was particularly wary of including states with which India has difficult bilateral relationships. Russia's interest in expansion was partly about escaping diplomatic isolation following the 2022 Ukraine invasion: a larger BRICS with more members willing to engage Moscow provided a platform for Russian diplomatic activity that Western sanctions had constrained (European Parliament Research Service, 2024; Stuenkel, 2020).

The resulting membership is heterogeneous in ways that create genuine coordination challenges. Iran is under comprehensive Western sanctions. Saudi Arabia and the UAE maintain close security relationships with the United States. Ethiopia was, at the time of accession, emerging from a civil conflict with significant Western diplomatic engagement. Indonesia is a democratic state with close trade ties to both the United States and China. The European Parliament Research Service (2024) read the expansion as a bid to consolidate Global South credentials while noting that the internal incoherence it introduced limits collective action.

1.5.6 The Kazan Summit and the partner state category

The October 2024 Kazan Summit, held under the Russian presidency, introduced the partner state category as a formal intermediate tier between full membership and the status of an observer or aspirant. The partner state concept addressed a practical problem: demand for BRICS association had outpaced the grouping's capacity for full membership expansion without generating the internal coordination costs that a very large membership would produce. Partner states gain access to BRICS summits, working groups, and thematic programs, and can participate in BRICS-affiliated mechanisms including NDB projects. They are not full voting members and do not sign the grouping's formal declarations. The nine inaugural partner states, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan, were selected from a larger pool of applicants. The criteria for selection, beyond formal eligibility, were not publicly specified, confirming the House of Commons Library's (2025) observation that political consensus among existing members is the operative gateway.

Sri Lanka applied for partner state status at Kazan and was not selected. That outcome is the starting point for the analysis of tenability in Section 5.

1.5.7 Goals and the reform agenda

BRICS's stated goals have evolved from the original emphasis on economic coordination toward a broader reform agenda with three elements. The first is reform of global financial institutions: BRICS declarations consistently call for greater representation of developing economies in the governance of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO, including reform of voting structures that currently give Western states disproportionate weight. The second is promotion

of multipolarity: BRICS frames itself as an institutional expression of the argument that the unipolar moment has passed and that global governance should reflect a more genuinely multipolar distribution of power. The third is South-South cooperation: BRICS positions itself as a platform for developing economies to coordinate on trade, investment, technology transfer, and development finance outside the conditionality frameworks of Western-led institutions (BRICS, 2023a; BRICS, 2024).

These goals give BRICS a normative agenda that goes beyond economic coordination. They also generate the principal tension for small states considering membership: associating with BRICS means association with its political positions, not merely with its financing mechanisms. For Sri Lanka, whose non-aligned tradition rests on the refusal to formally endorse any bloc's agenda, that tension is particularly acute.

1.5.8 Challenges and Internal Tensions

Three internal tensions limit BRICS's effective coherence. The first is the India-China rivalry. India and China are competitors across the Himalayan border, in the Indian Ocean, and in multilateral forums. Their bilateral tensions create a structural ceiling on BRICS's capacity for collective action on issues where their interest diverge, which include most questions of strategic significance in Asia (European Parliament Research Service, 2024). The India-China tension also shaped BRICS expansion decisions: India has resisted admissions that would tilt the grouping further toward China's sphere of influence, and China has preferred expansion that consolidates its own standing within BRICS relative to India.

The second challenge is economic disparity. The gap between China's economic weight and that of other BRICS members has widened over time. Among the original five founding members, China's nominal GDP is approximately double the combined total of Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa, a disparity that is more pronounced still within BRICS's expanded membership (BRICS Brazil, 2025). This asymmetry means that BRICS's economic institutions, including the NDB, are heavily influenced by Chinese preferences, and that the grouping's stated commitment to equality among members is difficult to sustain in practice (Stuenkel, 2020).

The third challenge is consensus-building, BRICS operates by consensus, which gives every member a de facto veto over collective decisions. With ten full members spanning different political systems, economic interests, and foreign policy orientations, building consensus on anything beyond broadly worded declarations has become progressively more difficult. The inclusion of Iran alongside Saudi Arabia, and of states with very different relationships to Western institutions, compounds this challenge (European Parliament Research Service, 2024; Stuenkel, 2020).

1.5.9 BRICS and the West: Institutional competition and coexistence

BRICS and Western-led institutions are better understood as operating on separate but intersecting tracks than as straightforwardly opposed. BRICS members remain active participants in the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and G20. None has withdrawn from these institutions. The NDB was built to work alongside existing development banks rather than displace them, and its first president sought direct collaboration with the World Bank (Stuenkel, 2020). BRICS declarations call for reform of Western-led institutions, not their removal.

The political logic of the grouping nonetheless carries institutional weight. BRICS exists in part to prove that governance arrangements outside the Western frame are viable, a claim the post-2023 expansion has made harder to dismiss. Western analysts sometimes describe the grouping as a G7 counterpart, a comparison that overstates its internal unity while capturing its external intent. For small states like Sri Lanka, which must maintain access to both institutional worlds, this is not a theoretical tension. It is the ordinary condition of their foreign policy.

2. Literature Review

This review maps on three bodies of scholarship on which this study draws: literature on BRICS as an institution, literature on small state foreign policy behavior, and literature on Sri Lanka's foreign policy tradition, with the purpose of showing what the existing scholarship establishes collectively and where it falls short. The gaps identified at the end of this section are the direct basis for the research questions this study addresses.

2.1 BRICS: Expansion logic and membership dynamics

The foundational scholarly argument on BRICS, developed most comprehensively by Stuenkel (2020), is that the grouping's primary value lies not in ideological coherence but in its collective assertion that Western-lead multilateral structures no longer hold a monopoly on legitimate global governance. BRICS member states, on this reading, pursue parallel institution-building through mechanisms such as the New Development Bank, that expand their policy options without requiring open confrontation with the existing order. This interpretation is well-supported and widely adopted, but it also establishes an important analytical caution: if BRICS functions primarily as a signaling platform rather than a unified strategic actor, then the benefits of membership are largely symbolic, and the costs are primarily perceptual.

The 2023 to 2025 expansion, which brought Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE in as full members from January 2024, followed by Indonesia in January 2025, with Saudi Arabia's membership remaining unconfirmed, reinforced both the opportunity and the caution. The European Parliamentary Research Service (2024) read the expansion as a bid to consolidate BRICS's Global South credentials, while noting that the India-China rivalry constraints collective action. The Institute for Security and Development Policy (2024) argued that prospective members joined for economic and diplomatic diversification, not ideological affiliation. Taken together, these analyses suggest that BRICS membership is valued instrumentally rather than normatively, a point that directly shapes how Sri Lanka's bid should be assessed.

The Johannesburg II Declaration (BRICS, 2023a) and the Guiding Principles on Membership Expansion (BRICS, 2023b) establish formal admission criteria covering geographic balance, existing diplomatic relations, support for UN reform and abstention from unilateral sanctions against members. The House of Commons Library (2025) observes that these criteria are broad enough to function as a statement of values rather than an admission filter; political consensus among existing members is the effective gateway. For Sri Lanka, this means the formal criteria are largely satisfied, but the political calculus of each member state, particularly India, remains the decisive variable.

2.2 Small state foreign policy: Hedging, voice, and the limits of neutrality

Vital (1967) established the foundational premise of small state IR theory: states that cannot shape the international system unilaterally must pursue indirect strategies, including multilateral engagement and deliberate positioning between competing great powers, to protect their sovereignty and advance their interest. The framework predates the current multipolar configuration, but its core logic remains applicable: Sri Lanka cannot unilaterally determine the outcome of its BRICS bid, and its primary instruments are relational rather than coercive. Neumann and Gstohl (2006) extended this analysis, arguing that small states can use multilateral institutions to amplify their diplomatic voice beyond their individual weight. This argument supports the case for BRICS association, but it also implies a cost: institutional affiliation carries positional signals that constrain the very flexibility that makes small state diplomacy effective. Goh (2007) developed hedging as the principal strategic response to this dilemma. In the Southeast Asian context, hedging describes the simultaneous cultivation of relationships with competing major powers to avoid over-dependence on any single patron while extracting benefits from multiple partnerships. Herath (2025) applied this framework to South Asia, identifying Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal as hedging states responding to India-China competition. Waidyatilake (2019) specified the Sri Lankan posture: Colombo maintains a stronger security relationship with India while sustaining meaningful economic ties with China. This is the hedging equilibrium that BRICS membership would disrupt, and it is the central tension this study analyses.

2.3 Sri Lanka's foreign policy: Strategic autonomy under structural pressure

Scholarship on Sri Lanka's foreign policy has produced a clear analytical consensus: non-alignment is a flexible instrument of national interest, not a fixed ideological position. ethiyagoda (2016) made this case most directly, arguing that Colombo has historically used strategic ambiguity to extract concessions from competing powers. Non-alignment, on this reading, is an active strategy with identifiable logic and measurable outcomes, not an absence of strategic thought. Abeyagoonasekera (2021) extends the argument, framing Sri Lanka's approach as strategic autonomy: a doctrine that permits simultaneous deep engagement with China, India, and the West, provided no single relationship forecloses the others. South Asia Journal (2024) confirms this from a regional comparative perspective, finding that non-alignment gives smaller South Asian states the operational room to move through great power rivalry without formal subordination. Aryasinha (2023) and Waidyatilake (2019) introduce the pressure dimension. Writing as a former diplomat, Aryasinha identifies multipolarity, great power competition, and the reassertion of the Global South as three simultaneous forces reshaping the environment in which Sri Lanka's foreign policy operates. Waidyatilake (2019) specifies the primary constraint: managing New Delhi and Beijing simultaneously in an environment where both powers are assertive in the Indian Ocean region. BRICS membership makes this constraint binding. Formal association with a China-anchored grouping sends a signal to India that Sri Lanka's strategic ambiguity is eroding, regardless of Colombo's stated intentions or actual behavior.

2.4 Gaps this study addresses

The three bodies of literature above are individually well-developed but analytically disconnected. Few studies examine Sri Lanka's BRICS bid through the combined lens of BRICS expansion dynamics, small state hedging theory, and Sri Lanka's specific foreign policy tradition. That intersection is precisely where the problem is located, and this study

addresses it directly.

Four specific gaps follow from this. First, Sri Lanka's BRICS membership application has not been the primary subject of dedicated analyses. Second, the partner state pathway introduced at the Kazan Summit in October 2024 has received little assessment as a realistic near-term option for small aspirant states; the literature focuses on full admission and leaves the intermediate category unexplored. Third, Herath's (2025) hedging analysis covers Sri Lanka comparatively but does not engage BRICS, leaving the question of how BRICS membership would affect Sri Lanka's hedging capacity unanswered. Fourth, the tension between IMF conditionality and BRICS membership remains underexamined for South Asian states; this study offers one of its central contributions. Together, these gaps define the analytical space this paper occupies.

3. Conceptual framework

This section defines the five concepts the paper uses throughout its analysis and explains how they function together as an analytical framework. Non-alignment and strategic autonomy define what Sri Lanka's foreign policy has historically protected and what membership would put at risk. Multipolarity and the Global South define the structural context in which the BRICS bid takes place. Small state foreign policy behavior, and specifically hedging, defines the strategic logic against which BRICS membership is assessed. Where these concepts become contested or context-dependent, the study specifies how they use them.

3.1 Non-alignment and strategic autonomy

Non-alignment refers to the deliberate avoidance of formal military or political alliances with major powers. As a doctrine, it was institutionalized through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) founded in 1961, which gave post-colonial states a collective framework for asserting sovereignty and pursuing independent foreign policies during the Cold War (Prashad, 2007). Sri Lanka was an early participant in the NAM and has maintained non-alignment as a stated foreign policy principle since independence. In practice, this has meant engaging with competing major powers, including India, China, the United States, and the Soviet Union and later Russia, without formal commitment to any single bloc (Pethiyagoda, 2016).

Strategic autonomy is the operative goal that non-alignment is designed to protect. It refers to a state's capacity to make independent foreign policy decisions in line with its own national interests, without these decisions being structurally predetermined by its institutional affiliations or economic dependencies. A state can maintain strategic autonomy while engaging deeply with multiple partners; what it cannot do is allow any single relationship to foreclose its options with others. Abeyagoonasekera (2021) frames Sri Lanka's foreign policy in precisely these terms: managed engagement that keeps all doors open simultaneously.

This distinction matters for the paper's argument. The question is not whether BRICS membership is compatible with non-alignment as an abstract principle, but whether it would preserve or erode Sri Lanka's strategic autonomy in practice. The paper argues that full BRICS membership would erode it by signaling a positional shift that India and Western partners would read as consequential regardless of Colombo's stated intentions. Partner state status, by contrast, preserves more of the ambiguity that strategic autonomy requires.

3.2 Multipolarity in the global south

Multipolarity describes a distribution of international power in which no single state or bloc exercises dominant global influence. It is distinguished from unipolarity, broadly associated with American predominance after the Cold War, and from bipolarity, broadly associated with competing superpowers. The contemporary international environment is multipolar in the sense that China, India, Russia, and regional powers now exercise meaningful influence alongside the United States and established European powers (Acharya, 2018). BRICS is both a product of this shift and an institutional expression of it, built on the premise that Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the G7 inadequately represent the interests of the Global South (Stuenkel, 2020).

The Global South, as used in this study, is a political and developmental category rather than a geographic one. It encompasses states that share experiences of colonialism, economic marginalization, and underrepresentation in global governance structures. Sri Lanka identifies with the Global South through its colonial history, its developmental status, and its long participation in South-South cooperation frameworks. This identification gives BRICS membership a degree of narrative coherence for Colombo. The analytical question the paper asks is whether that coherence translates into concrete strategic benefit, or whether it remains primarily symbolic.

3.3 Small state foreign policy behavior and hedging

Small states are defined in IR scholarship as those lacking the military, economic, or demographic capacity to shape the international system unilaterally (Vital, 1967). They navigate the international order through relational rather than coercive strategies, including multilateral coalition-building, alliance formation, and deliberate positioning between competing major powers. Neumann and Gstohl (2006) show that small states can use multilateral institutions to amplify their diplomatic voice, but this comes with a cost: institutional affiliation sends positional signals constrain the flexibility that small state diplomacy depends on.

Hedging is the strategy most relevant to Sri Lanka's situation. Goh (2007) defines it as the simultaneous cultivation of relationships with competing major powers to avoid over-dependence on any single patron while extracting economic and security benefits from multiple partnerships. It is distinct from both band wagoning, which involves aligning with the dominant power, and balancing, which involves forming coalitions against it. Hedging preserves maximum optionality by refusing to signal a definitive preference. Herath (2025) identifies Sri Lanka as a hedging state in the South Asian context, and Waidyatilake (2019) specifies the posture: a stronger security relationship with India alongside meaningful economic ties with China.

This paper uses hedging as its primary analytical lens for assessing BRICS membership. The central question is whether full membership, partner state status, or NDB-only engagement best preserves Sri Lanka's hedging position. The argument is that full membership would signal a definitive tilt toward the China-anchored side of the Indo-Pacific balance, undermining the hedging equilibrium that has defined Colombo's foreign policy for decades. Partner states status preserves more ambiguity and is therefore the more strategically coherent option.

3.4 How the framework guides the analysis

The five concepts operate as an integrated framework rather than independent definitions. Non-alignment and strategic autonomy define what is at stake. Multipolarity and the Global South define the context. Hedging defines the strategic logic. In Sections 5 and 6, the tenability assessment and the benefits and risks analysis are both conducted through this framework: each option for BRICS engagement is assessed against whether it preserves strategic autonomy, fits the multipolar context coherently, and maintains Sri Lanka's hedging equilibrium. Section 7 applies the framework to specific bilateral relationships, showing how different forms of BRICS association would affect each one. The framework is used consistently throughout and introduced here so it does not need to be explained again in later sections.

4. Research design and methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design. The research questions ask whether Sri Lanka's BRICS membership bid is tenable, what form of association is most realistic, and what the foreign policy consequences of different membership outcomes would be. These are questions about political feasibility, strategic logic, and diplomatic consequence: they require interpretive analysis of documentary evidence, not quantification of variables or hypothesis-testing. A qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology is therefore appropriate (Silverman, 2016). The study makes no claim to statistical generalization. It is analytical rigor applied to a specific, consequential, and underexamined policy question.

4.1 Data sources

The evidential base consists of four categories of source. The first is official documentation: BRICS summit declarations, the Guiding Principles on Membership Expansion, the Kazan Declaration (BRICS, 2023a; BRICS, 2023b; BRICS, 2024), and statements from Sri Lanka's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024). These establish the factual record of the application and the formal criteria against which it is assessed.

The second category is peer-reviewed and scholarly literature covering BRICS as an institution, small state foreign policy theory, and Sri Lanka's foreign policy tradition. The third category is policy analysis from established think-tanks and institutional research services, including the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, the European Parliament Research Service, the House of Commons Library, and the Institute for Security and Development Policy. The fourth category is on-record expert commentary from former senior Sri Lankan diplomats and foreign policy analysts, accessed through published interviews, policy papers, and institutional publications.

All sources were selected against four criteria: relevance to the research questions, source credibility, recency (with a preference for material published between 2018 and 2026), and open accessibility.

4.2 Limitations

Three limitations apply. First, BRICS internal deliberations are not publicly documented, which means the political consensus dimension of membership decisions cannot be fully assessed through open-access sources alone; the study acknowledges this gap and treats

assessments of political feasibility as analytical judgements rather than established facts. Second, Sri Lanka's BRICS situation is evolving; developments after May 2026 fall outside the study's scope and may alter some of its conclusions. Third, the study relies on published expert opinion rather than original field research, which means informal or unpublished expert assessments are not captured. These limitations do not undermine the study's analytical contributions but they do set its boundaries, and conclusions are set accordingly.

5. Assessing the tenability of Sri Lanka's BRICS bid

Tenability, as used in this study, has two dimensions. The first is eligibility: does Sri Lanka satisfy the formal criteria for BRICS membership? The second is political feasibility: is there a realistic path to membership given the current state of the grouping and the positions of its existing members? These are distinct questions that require separate analysis. Sri Lanka may satisfy the formal criteria while facing political obstacles that make full membership unachievable in the short to medium term. The analysis in this section works through both dimensions and concludes with an assessment of which forms of BRICS association are realistically available to Colombo.

5.1 Formal eligibility

The 2023 Guiding Principles on Membership Expansion (BRICS, 2023b) establish four formal criteria: geographic balance, good diplomatic relations with all existing members, support for global governance reform including UN Security Council reform, and the absence of unilateral sanctions imposed on any BRICS member. Sri Lanka meets all four. It would extend BRICS's South Asian footprint beyond India. It maintains functional diplomatic relations with all current members, including both India and China, a balance few aspirant states can claim. It has consistently supported multilateral reform frameworks at the UN. It has not imposed unilateral sanctions on any BRICS member state.

Formal eligibility is necessary but not sufficient. The House of Commons Library (2025) notes that the published criteria are broad enough to function as a statement of values rather than an admission filter. Most states that might wish to join BRICS could satisfy them. The operative determinant of admission is political consensus among existing members, and that consensus is shaped by strategic interests rather than criteria compliance. India's position is particularly consequential: New Delhi has been cautious about BRICS expansion, preferring a compact grouping where India's weight is more readily felt, it is unlikely to actively support a membership bid perceived as deepening Chinese influence in South Asia, based on the pattern of behavior documented in the expansion literature (European Parliament Research Service, 2024; Stuenkel, 2020).

5.2 Economic feasibility and the IMF constraint

Sri Lanka's economic profile complicates the membership case in one significant respect. The country is currently under an IMF Extended Fund Facility arrangement, following the severe economic and debt crisis of 2022 (International Monetary Fund, 2023). IMF conditionality requires fiscal discipline, structural reforms, and maintenance of productive relationships with Western financial institutions and creditors (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Formal membership in a grouping that includes states subject to comprehensive Western sanctions, particularly Russia and Iran, creates a reputational exposure that Sri Lanka's post-crisis

recovery cannot easily absorb. Western creditors and investors, whose confidence Sri Lanka is actively working to restore, would likely read BRICS membership as a signal of shifting alignment at a moment when Colombo needs to signal the opposite.

This tension remains underexamined in the existing literature and forms one of this study's original contributions. It does not make BRICS association impossible, but it does impose a practical constraint on timing: full membership is economically suboptimal for Sri Lanka while the IMF program remains active and the debt restructuring process is incomplete. Sri Lanka has, separately, secured membership in the NDB, which provides access to BRICS-affiliated development financing without triggering the political and reputational costs of full grouping membership. The NDB relationship is the most immediately valuable form of BRICS engagement available, and it is already in place.

5.3 Political and diplomatic alignment

Sri Lanka's alignment with BRICS principles is genuine but partial. Colombo has historically supported South-South cooperation, UN reform, and the political project of the Global South. The Dissanayake government's decision to formally apply in October 2024 reflects a deliberate effort to signal openness to non-Western partnerships (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2024). These are coherent positions, and Sri Lanka's colonial history and developmental status give the Global South identification credibility.

The limitation is that Sri Lanka's non-alignment doctrine makes full endorsement of the BRICS political agenda uncomfortable. BRICS increasingly positions itself as an institutional challenge to Western-led governance structures. Sri Lanka simultaneously cultivates relationships with the United States, the European Union, and international financial institutions. Endorsing the BRICS normative agenda in full would generate friction with Western partners that Sri Lanka, given its GSP+ trade preferences and ongoing IMF relationship, cannot afford at present. Partial alignment with BRICS principles is therefore the realistic diplomatic posture, and it may give some existing BRICS members reason to question the depth of Sri Lanka's commitment.

5.4 The membership landscape: What is available

Full BRICS membership is not currently available to any aspirant state. The Brazilian BRICS presidency indicated in 2025 that no further expansion was under consideration at that time, and that expressions of interest would be assessed on a case-by-case basis when conditions allow (BRICS Brazil, 2025). The partner state pathway, introduced at the Kazan Summit in October 2024 as a formal intermediate category, has already been operationalized without Sri Lanka. The first nine partner states, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan, were confirmed from January 2025. Sri Lanka expressed interest in this round and was not selected.

This outcome is analytically significant. It confirms that Sri Lanka has not yet secured any formal BRICS association beyond NDB membership, and that the decision to extend partner state status rests with existing members rather than with applicant states. It does not permanently foreclose future rounds, but it does establish that BRICS engagement for Sri Lanka will require a longer diplomatic timeline than the 2024 application implied.

5.5 Tenability: An analytical assessment

The tenability question can now be answered with precision. Full BRICS membership is not tenable in the short to medium term for three compounding reasons: the expansion process is formally paused; India's political support is uncertain; and Sri Lanka's IMF program creates economic disincentives that make the timing suboptimal. Partner state status in a future round is achievable but depends on BRICS members reopening the process and on Sri Lanka securing sufficient political support, particularly from India. NDB membership is already secured and represents the most tangible and least diplomatically costly form of BRICS engagement available.

The realistic strategic conclusion is that Sri Lanka should treat NDB engagement as its primary near-term BRICS objective, position itself for partner state status in a future round, and defer any push for full membership until the IMF program concludes and the diplomatic environment is more favorable. This conclusion directly shapes the analysis of benefits and risks in Section 6 and the policy recommendations in Section 9.

6. Benefits and risks: A structured assessment

Section 5 established that full BRICS membership is not currently available and that NDB engagement and partner state status are realistic near-term options. This section assesses the benefits and risks of BRICS association across economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical dimensions. The analysis takes as its reference points not full membership in the abstract but the three forms of engagement that are on the table: NDB membership already secured, partner state status in a future round, and full membership as a long-term scenario. The section concludes by weighing the overall balance and drawing the implication for Section 9's policy recommendations.

6.1 Economic benefits and risks

The primary economic benefit of BRICS association lies in NDB access. The NDB provides development financing on terms that differ from those offered by the IMF and World Bank: no explicit political conditionalities, demand-driven lending, and a governance structure in which no single state holds a veto (BRICS Brazil, 2025). For a country to rebuild its infrastructure base after a sovereign debt crisis, the NDB offers a complementary financing channel that does not require Colombo to choose between economic recovery and diplomatic independence. This benefit is already realized: Sri Lanka holds NDB membership without holding BRICS membership, which is the optimal configuration from an economic standpoint.

Beyond the NDB, BRICS economies collectively represent approximately 40% of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms (BRICS Brazil, 2025), and the grouping has explored local currency settlement mechanisms that could reduce Sri Lanka's exposure to dollar-denominated exchange rate risk. These are genuine long-term benefits, but their realization depends on BRICS developing functioning trade and payment infrastructure at a scale that is not yet achieved. The prospective nature of these gains matters: they are reasons to stay engaged with BRICS over time, not reasons to incur immediate diplomatic costs.

6.2 Diplomatic benefits and risks

The diplomatic case for BRICS association rests on the leverage argument developed by Pethiyagoda (2016) and formalized in Neumann and Gstohl's (2006) framework: small states that belong to groupings containing major powers gain leverage not only within those groupings but in their bilateral relationships outside them. BRICS membership or partner status would signal to all of Sri Lanka's partners that Colombo has institutionalized access to the rising powers bloc, which gives non-BRICS states an incentive to maintain and deepen their own relationships with Sri Lanka. The symbolic dimension also matters for a government that came to power on a platform of sovereign independence: BRICS association reinforces Colombo's identity as an active participant in the emerging multipolar order rather than a passive recipient of it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2024).

The diplomatic risks are specific and concentrated. The first is the signal to Western partners, particularly the United States and the European Union. Sri Lanka's garment sector depends on EU GSP+ preferences, and any perception that Colombo is aligning against Western-led institutions could generate friction in trade and investment relationships that Sri Lanka cannot afford to lose. The second risk is the signal to India, which is more consequential. India has been ambivalent about BRICS expansion throughout, and its position as Sri Lanka's closest neighbor, primary security partner, and largest crisis lender during the 2022 collapse means that any initiative that causes discomfort in New Delhi carries disproportionate cost. A BRICS bid perceived as tilting toward Beijing's agenda, regardless of Colombo's actual intentions, would be diplomatically expensive at a moment when the India relationship is central to Sri Lanka's recovery.

6.3 Geopolitical benefits and risks

The geopolitical case for BRICS association follows the hedging logic established in Section 3.3 of this paper. Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean location gives it inherent strategic value to all major powers, and formalizing engagement with the rising powers bloc throughout BRICS would, in theory, increase the competition for Colombo's alignment and thereby strengthen its bargaining position across all bilateral relationships. There is also a long-term structural argument: BRICS is developing institutional infrastructure, including NDB lending, local currency trade frameworks, and payment system alternatives to SWIFT, that could over time reduce the structural leverage Western financial institutions exercise over developing economies. Early association positions Sri Lanka to benefit from these frameworks as they mature.

The geopolitical risk is the erosion of the hedging position itself. Full BRICS membership in a China-anchored grouping would in all likelihood be read by India, the United States, and the European Union as a positional shift, regardless of Sri Lanka's stated intentions. As Abeyagoonasekara (2021) argues, Sri Lanka's foreign policy conundrum is that any visible tilt toward one power triggers recalibration by others. The country's post-crisis economic vulnerability makes it poorly positioned to absorb that recalibration. A secondary geopolitical risk lies within BRICS itself: the expanded membership, which now includes Iran, Ethiopia, and states with highly divergent foreign policy orientations, has increased the grouping's internal incoherence (Stuenkel, 2020; European Parliament Research Service, 2024). Sri Lanka could find itself formally associated with a grouping that is rhetorically significant but operationally limited, having paid diplomatic costs without receiving commensurate strategic returns.

6.4 The balance

Across all three dimensions, the pattern is consistent. The benefits of BRICS association are real but predominantly prospective and conditional on BRICS developing greater institutional functionality over time. The risks are structural and immediate: the IMF constraint applies now, the India relationship is sensitive now, and the perception of positional shift would be registered now. The NDB relationship captures the most tangible near-term benefit without triggering the most serious risks. Partner state status in a future round would add diplomatic and symbolic value at a manageable cost if pursued carefully. Full membership would deliver incremental additional benefits while incurring disproportionate diplomatic and economic costs under current conditions.

The overall analytical conclusion is that Sri Lanka's optimal near-term position is to deepen NDB engagement, position for partner State status, and defer any push for full membership until the IMF program concludes and the India relationship has been appropriately managed. This conclusion is developed into specific policy recommendations in Section 9.

7. Foreign policy implications

This section examines what different levels of BRICS engagement would mean for Sri Lanka's specific bilateral relationships and for its broader foreign policy orientation. The analysis is organized around the five relationships and principles most directly affected: India, China, the United States, the European Union, non-alignment and strategic autonomy, and Sri Lanka's multilateral posture. The conceptual framework from Section 3 guides the assessment throughout.

7.1 India

India is the most consequential variable in Sri Lanka's BRICS calculus. As the country's closest geographic neighbor, its largest bilateral lender during the 2022 crisis, and its primary security partner, India has both the proximity and the leverage to make any foreign policy shift by Colombo costly if New Delhi perceives it as threatening Indian interests. India's own relationship with BRICS is ambivalent: it is a founding member but has consistently favored a compact, strategically coherent grouping over one that expands Chinese influence in its immediate neighborhood. New Delhi's preference for careful management of BRICS expansion means that Sri Lanka's bid requires active Indian support, or at minimum Indian acquiescence, to succeed.

The risk is not that India would openly oppose Sri Lanka's BRICS application, but that New Delhi would quietly withhold the support that a consensus-based admission process requires. India reads Sri Lanka's Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, including the Hambantota Port lease, as precedents for the kind of economic over-dependence that BRICS association might deepen (Waidyatilake, 2019). A Sri Lanka that joins BRICS under Chinese sponsorship, even implicitly, would likely register in New Delhi as a strategic signal Colombo must therefore manage this relationship proactively: maintaining transparency with India about the terms and intentions of its BRICS engagement and demonstrating that association with BRICS does not represent a shift in the security relationship with India. Partner state status, precisely because it is less formal and less politically loaded than full membership, is easier to manage

with India than a full membership application.

7.2 China

China has an interest in Sri Lanka's BRICS membership that is not identical to Sri Lanka's own interest in it. For Beijing, a South Asian neighbor joining a China-anchored grouping is a strategic gain regardless of Colombo's internal reasoning. This divergence of interest is analytically important: Sri Lanka should not assume that Chinese support for its membership bid translates into Chinese alignment with Sri Lanka's strategic objectives within BRICS. China's support, where it exists, is instrumental rather than altruistic.

Sri Lanka's existing economic relationship with China is substantial. Chinese investment in infrastructure, including the Hambantota Port, the Colombo Port City, and road and energy projects, has generated both developmental benefits and dependency risks (Waidyatilake, 2019; Abeyagoonasekera, 2021). The Hambantota Port lease in particular established a precedent that Indian and Western commentators read as evidence of a debt-for-equity pattern that BRICS membership could deepen. Sri Lanka's BRICS engagement should therefore be structured to avoid reinforcing the perception that Colombo is moving further into China's strategic orbit. NDB membership and partner state status both allow Sri Lanka to engage the BRICS ecosystem without the symbolic weight of full membership, which is the more appropriate posture given the existing dependency risks in the bilateral relationship.

7.3 The United States

The United States does not hold a veto over Sri Lanka's foreign policy choices, but it holds leverage through trade preferences, development assistance, and its influence over international financial institutions. Washington has watched Sri Lanka's Chinese infrastructure debt with concern and has encouraged Colombo to diversify its partnerships in ways that reduce strategic dependence. American interest in Sri Lanka is partly about Sri Lanka itself and partly about the Indian Ocean strategic competition with China. From Washington's perspective, a Sri Lanka that joins BRICS formally would represent a diplomatic loss in a region where the United States is competing for influence (European Parliament Research Service, 2024).

The practical implications for Sri Lanka are concentrated in two areas. The first is bilateral development assistance, which is politically sensitive to signals of strategic realignment. The second is American influence over the IMF process, where Washington holds significant voting weight. Sri Lanka's IMF program requires ongoing American support within the Fund's governance structures. Formal BRICS membership at this stage would complicate that relationship unnecessarily. Partner state status and NDB engagement can be pursued without triggering the same level of American concern.

7.4 The European Union

The European Union's primary point of leverage over Sri Lanka is the GSP+ trade preference scheme, which provides duty-free access to EU markets for Sri Lankan exports, primarily garments and tea, in exchange for the implementation of 27 international conventions on human rights, labor rights, environmental protection, and governance (European Commission, 2025). GSP+ is not conditioned on foreign policy alignment with the EU, but it is subject to periodic review, and any perception that Sri Lanka is strategically distancing itself from

Western-led norms could affect the political environment in which those reviews take place.

The EU has been a consistent voice for a rule-based international order and has viewed BRICS's expansion, particularly the inclusion of Iran and Russia, with concern. Sri Lanka's BRICS membership would not automatically trigger a GSP+ review, but it would add a layer of political complexity to Sri Lanka's relationship with Brussels at a moment when Colombo needs European markets to absorb its export sector. The diplomatic management challenge is to signal to the EU that BRICS engagement is about development finance and multilateral voice, not about endorsing the political positions of BRICS members on issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict or Iran's nuclear program. This framing is more credible at the partner state level than at full membership.

7.5 Non-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy

The deepest foreign policy implication of BRICS membership is what it would mean for Sri Lanka's non-aligned posture and the strategic autonomy that posture is designed to protect. The analysis in this paper has consistently argued that non-alignment functions as an active strategic instrument rather than a passive position, and that its value lies in preserving Colombo's freedom of action across all its bilateral relationships simultaneously. Full BRICS membership would compromise that freedom in two ways.

The first is the perception effect: regardless of what Sri Lanka does or says, full membership in a grouping that is understood internationally as a counterweight to Western-led institutions signals a positional shift. That signal is read by India, the United States, and the European Union and triggers recalibration in each relationship. The second is the structural effect: BRICS membership creates institutional obligations and affiliations that, over time, shape the range of positions available to Sri Lanka in multilateral forums. A BRICS member that consistently endorses the grouping's declarations on global governance, the international monetary system, and conflict resolution progressively narrows the space available for independent positioning on those issues.

Partner state status avoids both effects to a significant degree. It provides access to BRICS platforms and symbolic alignment with the Global South without the full institutional weight of membership. NDB engagement avoids both effects entirely, maintaining the economic benefits of BRICS association while generating no positional signal at all. From a strategic autonomy standpoint: the lower the level of BRICS association, the more Sri Lanka's non-aligned foreign policy identity is preserved.

7.6 Multilateral posture

Sri Lanka participates actively in a range of multilateral forums including the United Nations, SAARC, IORA, BIMSTEC, and the Commonwealth. BRICS membership or partner state status would add another institutional affiliation to this portfolio, with both complementary and complicating effects. On the complementary side, BRICS association would reinforce Sri Lanka's standing in Global South coalitions, strengthen its voice on issues of development finance and governance reform, and provide a platform for engaging the major emerging economies collectively rather than bilaterally. On the complicating side, BRICS positions on certain multilateral issues, particularly those involving Russia and Iran, are at odds with positions that Sri Lanka has historically taken or that its Western partners expect it to take.

The net effect on Sri Lanka's multilateral posture depends on how BRICS association is managed. A Sri Lanka that joins BRICS as a platform for development finance and South-South cooperation, while maintaining its independent positions on security and governance issues, could add BRICS to its multilateral portfolio without major disruption. A Sri Lanka perceived as endorsing the BRICS political agenda wholesale would find its multilateral relationships with Western-aligned institutions complicated. The distinction between these two postures is more manageable at the partner state level than at full membership, where the expectation of alignment with grouping positions is higher.

8. Comparative reference points

This section draws briefly on the experience of comparable small states to ground the paper's conclusions in observable precedent. The purpose is not to conduct a comparative study but to test the analytical framework against cases where similar states have faces similar decisions, and to draw lessons that are directly applicable to Sri Lanka's situation. Three reference points are relevant.

8.1 Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the South Asian comparator most directly relevant to Sri Lanka's situation. Like Sri Lanka, it is a small lower-middle-income economy navigating India-China competition from a position of geographic proximity to India and economic dependence on Chinese investment. Herath's (2025) LKI analysis identifies Bangladesh as a hedging state exhibiting behavior closely parallel to Sri Lanka's own. Bangladesh has not applied for BRICS membership and has maintained a careful distance from formal institutional alignment with either India or China, while engaging both economically. The Bangladesh case supports the paper's argument that hedging without formal BRICS association is a viable and coherent strategy for South Asian small states at this juncture.

8.2 Vietnam

Vietnam is a Southeast Asian comparator that has maintained a broadly successful hedging strategy between China and the United States despite deep historical and geographic entanglement with both. Vietnam pursued BRICS association at the partner state rather than full membership level and was reported to have joined as a BRICS partner country at the 17th BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro in July 2025, a development that, if confirmed, shows both the appeal of BRICS engagement among hedging states and the logic of limiting association to the intermediate tier. Vietnam's approach, engaging BRICS platforms while anchoring its regional diplomacy within ASEAN's non-interference framework, is instructive for Sri Lanka. The choice of institutional vehicle matters: ASEAN's balanced membership provides collective diplomatic cover that BRICS, as a more politically loaded grouping, does not. Sri Lanka's equivalent anchoring platform might be IORA or BIMSTEC, both of which allow engagement with India and China simultaneously without the geopolitical signaling that full BRICS membership carries (Goh, 2007).

8.3 The UAE as a BRICS member

The UAE accepted BRICS membership as a full member from January 2024 (BRICS, 2023a; BRICS, 2024) and offers a limited but instructive contrast. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which received the same invitation at Johannesburg 2023 but had not formally accepted membership at the time of writing, the UAE moved quickly to join, a contrast that shows how small states with different strategic configurations respond to the same institutional offer. Abu Dhabi is a wealthy, strategically positioned small state with deep economic ties to both Western financial systems and Chinese trade. And it has managed BRICS membership without triggering significant diplomatic disruption with the United States or its Western partners. However, the UAE's situation differs from Sri Lanka's in three important respects: it is not under IMF conditionality; it has significantly greater economic leverage; and its relationship with India is complimentary rather than asymmetric. The UAE case does not establish a general template for small state BRICS membership but it does suggest that the diplomatic management challenges are not insurmountable for states with sufficient economic and diplomatic capital. Sri Lanka does not yet possess that level of economic and diplomatic capital under current recovery conditions.

8.4 Lessons for Sri Lanka

Three lessons emerge from these comparators. First, hedging without formal BRICS association is viable for South Asian small states and may be preferable to the diplomatic costs of full membership at this stage, as the Bangladesh case suggests. Second, the choice of multilateral platform matters: Sri Lanka should consider IORA or BIMSTEC, which include both India and China without BRICS's geopolitical loading, might serve its multilateral objectives more effectively than BRICS at this juncture. Third, the UAE case establishes that BRICS membership is not inherently incompatible with Western relationships, but it also confirms that the conditions under which Sri Lanka might manage that balance successfully are not yet in place.

9. Policy recommendations

9.1 Immediate priority: Deepen NDB engagement

Sri Lanka's most productive immediate action is to maximize the value of its existing NDB membership. This means identifying specific infrastructure and sustainable development projects for NDB financing, building institutional relationships within the Bank's governance structures, and establishing Sri Lanka as an active and creditworthy borrower. NDB financing does not require BRICS membership and does not carry the diplomatic costs of formal association. The Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Finance should coordinate to develop a pipeline of NDB-eligible projects that addresses Sri Lanka's infrastructure deficit while demonstrating the productive use of BRICS-affiliated financing to both domestic and international audiences.

9.2 Near-term: Position for partner state status

Sri Lanka should actively prepare for consideration in the next round of partner state

consultations. This requires two parallel tracks. The first is diplomatic: Colombo should engage existing BRICS members bilaterally, and India in particular, to build understanding of Sri Lanka's intentions and to secure at minimum Indian acquiescence to partner start status. The framing should emphasize development finance and South-South Cooperation rather than geopolitical alignment. The second track is institutional: Sri Lanka should engage with BRICS working groups, summit processes, and thematic programs at the sectoral level, demonstrating constructive participation in the BRICS ecosystem before formal status is granted. Partner state status, when it comes, should be presented domestically and internationally as a continuation of Sri Lanka's established South-South alignment rather than as a strategic pivot.

9.3 Manage the India relationship proactively

India's acquiescence to Sri Lanka's BRICS engagement is a precondition for its success, not an outcome that can be assumed. The Foreign Ministry should maintain open and transparent communication with New Delhi about the scope and intentions of Sri Lanka's BRICS engagement and should seek early Indian support for partner status as a diplomatic objective. Sri Lanka should simultaneously reinforce the bilateral security relationship with India, the defense cooperation framework, and the connectivity agenda to signal that BRICS association does not represent a reorientation of the foundational security relationship. The India relationship is not in competition with BRICS engagement; it is the diplomatic foundation on which BRICS engagement must be built.

9.4 Defer Full Membership Until Conditions Change

Sri Lanka should not actively pursue full BRICS membership while the IMF program remains active. The economic and reputational costs of full membership under current conditions outweigh the benefits, and the membership pathway is in any case formally closed. The Foreign Ministry should manage public expectations, accordingly, framing the current objective as NDB engagement and partner state status rather than full membership, while reserving full membership as a long-term aspiration to be revisited once the debt restructuring process is complete and the diplomatic environment is more favorable.

9.5 Maintain the non-aligned posture publicly and substantively

Sri Lanka's engagement with BRICS must be consistently framed within the non-aligned foreign policy identity, both publicly and in diplomatic channels. This means avoiding language that suggest BRICS association represents a political alignment with the grouping's positions on contested geopolitical issues, maintaining independent positions in multilateral forums where BRICS members take positions that conflict with Sri Lanka's established stances, and ensuring that BRICS engagement does not crowd out Sri Lanka's active participation in IORA, BIMSTEC, SAARC, and other multilateral frameworks that include both India and China without BRICS's geopolitical loading. Strategic autonomy is not preserved by avoiding BRICS engagement; it is preserved by ensuring that BRICS engagement is structured on terms that do not foreclose other relationships.

10. Conclusion

This study set out to answer five questions: Is Sri Lanka's BRICS membership tenable? What form of BRICS engagement is most realistic? What are the main benefits and risks? How would BRICS affect Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation? And does the analysis sustain a single unified argument from start to finish? This conclusion addresses each question directly and identifies the contributions the study makes to the existing scholarship.

10.1 Principal findings

Full BRICS membership is not tenable for Sri Lanka in the short to medium term. The expansion process is formally paused, India's political support is uncertain, and the interaction between BRICS association and Sri Lanka's active IMF program creates economic and reputational costs that the current recovery phase cannot absorb. Sri Lanka was not selected for partner state status in the first round of consultations in 2025, confirming that even the intermediate category requires diplomatic groundwork that has not yet been completed.

The most realistic near-term form of BRICS engagement is NDB membership, which Sri Lanka already holds, followed by partner state status in a future round. NDB membership provides the most tangible benefits, specifically access to development financing without political conditionalities, at the lowest diplomatic cost. Partner state status would add symbolic alignment with the Global South and structured access to BRICS processes at a manageable diplomatic price if pursued carefully and with adequate Indian groundwork.

The main benefits of BRICS association are prospective and conditional: development finance through the NDB, diplomatic leverage through multilateral voice, and long-term positioning within the emerging alternative financial architecture that BRICS is building. The main risks are structural and immediate: the IMF conditionality constraint, the risk to the India relationship, and the erosion of strategic autonomy through a perceived positional shift toward the China-anchored side of the Indo-Pacific balance.

BRICS engagement at the NDB and partner state level would have a limited but manageable effect on Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation, provided it is framed within the country's established non-aligned identity and managed transparently with India. Full membership would have a more significant effect, disrupting the hedging equilibrium that has defined Colombo's foreign policy for decades and generating diplomatic recalibration from India, the United States, and the European Union that Sri Lanka is not currently positioned to absorb.

10.2 Contributions to the scholarship

This study makes four contributions to existing literature. First, it offers a focused analysis of Sri Lanka's BRICS membership bid, connecting the BRICS expansion literature, small state foreign policy theory, and the Sri Lanka foreign policy scholarship in a single sustained argument. Second, it assesses the partner state pathway as a realistic near-term option for small aspirant states, filling a gap that the existing literature on BRICS membership has not addressed. Third, it identifies and analyses the interaction between IMF conditionality and BRICS membership aspirations in the South Asian context, an analytically consequential

tension that remains underexamined. Fourth, it applies Goh's hedging framework to the BRICS question in the Sri Lankan context, showing that full membership would disrupt the hedging equilibrium that has underpinned Colombo's foreign policy effectiveness, while partner state status preserves it.

10.3 Directions for future research

Three directions for future research follow this study. First, if Sri Lanka obtains partner state status in a future round, a follow-up study assessing the practical effects of that status on its bilateral relationships and multilateral posture would be valuable. Second, the interaction between IMF conditionality and BRICS membership warrants broader comparative examination across South Asian and Global South states that are simultaneously navigating IMF program and BRICS aspirations. Third, the partner state category as a diplomatic instrument deserves dedicated study: how existing partner states use the status, what it delivers in practice, and whether it functions as a pathway to full membership or as a permanent intermediate arrangement are questions that the current literature has not yet addressed.

References

- Abeyagoonasekera, A. (2021). *Conundrum of an island: Sri Lanka's geopolitical challenges*. World Scientific.
- Acharya, A. (2018). *The end of American world order* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Aryasinha, R. (2023, October). *A global order in flux: Challenges and opportunities* [Policy paper]. Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. <https://lki.lk/publication/a-global-order-in-flux-challenges-and-opportunities/>
- BRICS. (2023a). *Johannesburg II declaration*. XV BRICS Summit. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/speech_docs/Jhb%20II%20Declaration%2024%20Aug%202023.pdf
- BRICS. (2023b). *Guiding principles, standards, criteria and procedures for BRICS membership expansion*. XV BRICS Summit. <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/BRICS-Membership-expansion-guiding-principles-criteria-and-standards-2023.pdf>
- BRICS. (2024). *Kazan declaration: Strengthening multilateralism for just global development and security*. XVI BRICS Summit. <https://dirco.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/XVI-BRICS-Summit-Kazan-Declaration-23-October-2024.pdf>
- BRICS Brazil. (2025). *Frequently asked questions about the BRICS*. <https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-brics>
- European Commission. (2025). *Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+)*. <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/generalised-scheme-preferences-plus-gsp>
- European Parliament Research Service. (2024). *Expansion of BRICS: A quest for greater global influence?* (EPRS_BRI(2024)760368). European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)760368](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)760368)
- Goh, E. (2007). Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia. *International Security*, 32(3), 113–157. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.113>
- Goldman Sachs. (2001). *Building better global economic BRICs* (Global Economics Paper No. 66). Goldman Sachs.
- Herath, T. (2025). *Deciphering hedging: A comparative analysis of the foreign policy behaviour of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka* [Policy brief]. Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. <https://lki.lk/publication/deciphering-hedging-a-comparative-analysis-of-the-foreign-policy-behaviour-of-bangladesh-nepal-and-sri-lanka/>
- House of Commons Library. (2025). *The BRICS group: Overview and recent expansion* (Research Briefing CBP-10136). UK Parliament. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10136/>

International Monetary Fund. (2023). *IMF executive board approves US\$3 billion under the extended fund facility arrangement for Sri Lanka* (Press Release No. 23/79). <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/03/20/pr2379-imf-executive-board-approves-under-the-new-eff-arrangement-for-sri-lanka>

Institute for Security and Development Policy. (2024). *BRICS: Evolving into a vehicle* [ISDP Backgrounder]. <https://isdpeu.org/brics-evolving-into-a-vehicle/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka. (2024a). Sri Lanka's BRICS membership application, Kazan Summit. <https://mfa.gov.lk/fsa-brics-kazan/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka. (2024b). No truth in BRICS membership claims. <https://mfa.gov.lk/no-truth-in-brics/>

Neumann, I. B., & Gstohl, S. (2006). Lilliputians in Gulliver's world? In C. Ingebritsen, I. Neumann, S. Gstohl, & J. Beyer (Eds.), *Small states in international relations* (pp. 3–36). University of Washington Press.

O'Neill, J. (2024, October 17). The BRICS still don't matter. *Project Syndicate*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/moscow-brics-summit-expanded-bloc-still-rudderless-and-ineffective-by-jim-o-neill-2024-10>

Pethiyagoda, K. (2016, September 3). *Why small states matter in international politics: The case of Sri Lanka* [Blog post]. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-small-states-matter-in-international-politics-the-case-of-sri-lanka/>

Prashad, V. (2007). *The darker nations: A people's history of the Third World*. The New Press.

Silverman, D. (2016). *Qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

South Asia Journal. (2024). Nonalignment and Sri Lanka's foreign policy. <https://southasiajournal.net/nonalignment-and-sri-lankas-foreign-policy/>

Stuenkel, O. (2020). *The BRICS and the future of global order* (2nd ed.). Lexington Books.

Vital, D. (1967). *The inequality of states: A study of the small power in international relations*. Clarendon Press.

Waidyatilake, B. (2019). *Small states and great powers: The role of Sri Lanka and India-China competition in the Indian Ocean* [LKI Working Paper]. Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. <https://lki.lk/publication/small-states-and-great-powers-the-role-of-sri-lanka-and-india-china-competition-in-the-indian-ocean/>

Wilson, D., & Purushothaman, R. (2003). *Dreaming with BRICs: The path to 2050* (Global Economics Paper No. 99). Goldman Sachs.