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BRICS Enlargement and the Institutional Convergence of the Indian Ocean and West Asian Regional Security Complexes: Implications for India's Strategic Autonomy

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Abstract

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) has conventionally treated the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and West Asia as analytically distinct security complexes, connected only loosely through great-power overlay. The 2024 enlargement of BRICS which brought Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates into full membership alongside founding member India, with Saudi Arabia occupying an unresolved associate status has drawn actors from both complexes into a single multilateral institutional framework. This paper asks whether this development constitutes a genuine merger of the two regional security complexes, an instance of institutional overlay, or a distinct pathway of regional change that RSCT has not yet theorized. Using a qualitative, historical-comparative method that examines BRICS summit declarations, energy and connectivity linkages, and the persistence of intra-bloc security frictions, the paper argues that BRICS enlargement has produced institutional convergence without corresponding security convergence. This decoupling carries direct implications for India, which now occupies the institutional seam between both complexes and must manage this convergence while preserving its strategic autonomy.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex Theory, BRICS, Indian Ocean Region, West Asia, strategic autonomy, multipolarity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) reorganized the study of international security around the regional level, arguing that most security dynamics are best understood not at the global systemic level but within geographically clustered sets of states bound together by mutually reinforcing patterns of amity and enmity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Within this framework, the authors identified South Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral as one such complex, and further subdivided the wider Middle East into distinct sub-complexes such as the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states together with Iran and Yemen (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). For roughly two decades this separation between the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and West Asia held reasonably well as an analytical device. The IOR's security dynamics were defined chiefly by the India-Pakistan rivalry, an expanding Chinese naval and commercial footprint, and India's own evolving self-conception as a maritime "net security provider" for littoral and island states (Roy-Chaudhury, 2022). West Asia's dynamics, meanwhile, revolved around the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Iran-Saudi rivalry, and the Arab-Israeli axis, underwritten for decades by an American security umbrella (Ullah & Xinlei, 2024).

Since January 2024, however, an institutional development has emerged that RSCT's original vocabulary does not comfortably capture. The BRICS grouping's enlargement which admitted Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates as full members effective 1 January 2024, followed by Indonesia in January 2025, while Saudi Arabia has remained in a prolonged and deliberately ambiguous accession process has drawn West Asian states into the same multilateral architecture as India, China, and the other founding BRICS members (de Carvalho, Anand, & Naidu, 2025). This is not the kind of boundary-changing mechanism RSCT traditionally privileges, such as conquest, alliance formation, or great-power military overlay. It is instead a case of institutional convergence, driven substantially by economic and diplomatic architecture energy trade, New Development Bank financing, and emerging connectivity corridors such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) rather than by the security logics RSCT was originally built to explain.

This development raises a puzzle of both theoretical and policy significance. Does BRICS enlargement constitute a genuine merger of the IOR and West Asian regional security complexes? Does it represent an instance of institutional "overlay" by a new configuration of external actors? Or does it constitute a distinct pathway of regional change that existing RSCT scholarship has not yet theorized? This paper argues for the third position. It contends that BRICS enlargement has produced institutional convergence without a corresponding convergence in the underlying security dynamics of the two regions. The IOR and West Asian complexes are increasingly bound together at the level of economic and diplomatic architecture, even as their respective rivalries, threat perceptions, and alliance patterns remain largely unintegrated, a pattern visible, for instance, in the continuing friction between Iran and the UAE and Saudi Arabia inside the same bloc, and in the Egypt-Ethiopia rift that surfaced at the September 2024 BRICS foreign ministers' meeting. This decoupling between institutional and security convergence is itself analytically significant, and it carries direct consequences for India, which now sits at the institutional seam between both complexes and must navigate this convergence while preserving the strategic autonomy that has defined its foreign policy posture since independence.

Section 2 of this paper reviews the relevant literature across RSCT, IOR and West Asian security studies, BRICS/multipolarity scholarship, and comparable institutional precedents, and identifies the specific gap this paper addresses. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, including the paper's central conceptual contribution of "institutional convergence" as a distinct RSC boundary-change pathway, and its relationship to Middle Power Theory and Acharya's multiplexity. Section 4 outlines the qualitative, document-based methodology. Sections 5 and 6 maps the two regional security complexes prior to 2024 and analyze BRICS enlargement as a convergence mechanism, respectively. Section 7 tests this convergence against Buzan and Wæver's own typology of regional change and against the comparable SCO precedent. Section 8 examines India's strategic position at this institutional seam. Section 9 acknowledges the paper's limitations and proposes directions for future research, and Section 10 concludes with implications for both regional security theory and Indian foreign policy.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond a narrow theoretical debate within RSCT. For India specifically, understanding whether BRICS enlargement is drawing the IOR and West Asia into a genuinely unified security architecture, or merely into a shared but security-decoupled institutional space, has direct bearing on how New Delhi should calibrate its own posture whether it should treat its BRICS partners in West Asia as an extension of its own maritime security perimeter, or whether it should continue to manage its Gulf relationships and its IOR responsibilities as analytically and operationally distinct undertakings that happen to share an institutional roof. Getting this distinction right matters for concrete policy questions: how much diplomatic capital India invests in mediating intra-BRICS Gulf tensions, how it sequences its own naval deployments and connectivity investments, and how it frames its 2026 BRICS chairmanship agenda relative to its independent Indian Ocean security commitments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Regional Security Complex Theory.

RSCT emerged from Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regions and Powers, which built on the Copenhagen School's earlier work on securitization (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) to argue that regional-level security dynamics deserve analytical priority over purely global-systemic explanations. A regional security complex, in their formulation, is a set of units whose major processes of securitization and desecuritization are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another. The theory's central innovation was to insist that the regional level is not merely a subordinate layer beneath global bipolarity or unipolarity, but possesses its own relatively autonomous logic, shaped by geographic proximity and the resulting inescapability of interaction among neighboring states. Buzan and Wæver's own application of the theory to the Middle East divided the region into three sub-complexes the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf with the Gulf identified as a distinct security sub-complex in its own right, a reading later reinforced by subsequent Gulf-focused RSCT scholarship (Han & Hakimian, 2019). The South Asian complex, meanwhile, was defined principally around the India-Pakistan rivalry, with the wider Indian Ocean treated as an adjoining maritime space whose security dynamics were shaped by, but not identical to, the South Asian core.

2.2 The Indian Ocean Region as a security complex.

Scholarship on the IOR has increasingly centered on India's attempt to define and operationalize a security role commensurate with its economic and demographic weight. Roy-Chaudhury (2022) traces the evolution of India's declared maritime posture from an ambitious "net security provider" framing after 2011, through the narrower "provider of net maritime security," to the 2020 shift toward being a "preferred security partner" for littoral and island states a progression the author attributes to budgetary and capacity constraints as much as to strategic recalibration. This literature situates India as the IOR's central but resource-constrained pivot, operating increasingly through minilateral and multilateral arrangements in response to China's expanding presence following the 2020 border clashes. A recurring theme in this scholarship is India's dependence on the IOR's sea lanes for its own energy security, since the great majority of India's crude oil imports and a comparable share of its overall trade by volume transit Indian Ocean shipping routes, making the security of these lanes a first-order national interest rather than a purely expeditionary concern.

2.3 West Asia as a security complex.

Parallel scholarship on West Asia has emphasized the persistence of the Gulf as a discrete security sub-complex centered on the Iran-Saudi rivalry, later complicated by the Abraham Accords and their effect on Gulf-Israel alignment. Ullah and Xinlei (2024) apply RSCT explicitly to the post-rapprochement Gulf, arguing that Saudi-Iranian détente since 2023 has altered but not dissolved the region's underlying security architecture, particularly against the backdrop of receding American commitment and growing Chinese engagement. Han and Hakimian (2019) caution more specifically against reducing Iran-GCC tension to a purely sectarian Shia-Sunni framing, arguing instead that the rivalry is better understood as a contest between competing regional political projects operating within a single, historically continuous Persian Gulf security sub-complex dating to the 1970s. Complementary work on the "West Asia" framing itself notes that the term emerged partly as a deliberate alternative to the colonial-era "Middle East" label, and that non-Arab actors such as Iran and Turkey increasingly reorient scholarly and policy attention away from a purely Arab-centric reading of the region (Center for International and Regional Studies, 2020). More recent reporting on intra-GCC divergence during the 2025 Israel-Iran conflict period illustrates that even within the Gulf sub-complex, member states hold visibly different threat perceptions of Iran and Israel alike, with the UAE naming Iran its principal security concern while Oman and Qatar directed sharper criticism toward Israeli conduct (Institute for International Political Studies, 2026).

2.4 Comparable institutional convergence:

The SCO precedent. A useful comparative precedent for the phenomenon this paper examines is the earlier accession of Gulf states to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which Iran joined as a full member in 2023 and to which Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been linked as dialogue partners. Papageorgiou and Jamali (2024) find that Gulf state's engagement with the SCO reflects a deliberate strategy of avoiding clear-cut alignment in US-China competition, using SCO membership to signal diversification and strategic autonomy rather than to displace their existing American security relationships. Notably, the GCC as a bloc has been reluctant to engage the SCO collectively, preferring bilateral or individual state-level engagement, a pattern that anticipates the individualized, non-uniform character of Gulf states' BRICS engagement documented later in this paper. This precedent is instructive: it suggests that Gulf states have, over the past several years, developed a repeatable playbook of joining Eurasian-oriented multilateral institutions for economic and diplomatic diversification while carefully avoiding any institutional commitment that would compromise their core security relationship with Washington. BRICS enlargement should therefore be read as an extension of this established pattern, not as a categorically new departure in Gulf foreign policy behavior.

2.5 BRICS and multipolarity.

A rapidly growing literature has emerged around BRICS's 2024 enlargement. De Carvalho, Anand, and Naidu (2025) apply Acharya's multiplexity framework and Strange's structural power framework to argue that BRICS enlargement represents strategic adaptation with limited transformative potential, since the bloc's institutional innovations chiefly the New Development Bank and the new partner-country tier remain embedded within, rather than disruptive of, existing Western-anchored financial structures. Their analysis is particularly attentive to the fact that BRICS enlargement has broadened the bloc's geopolitical and economic footprint without producing correspondingly deep institutional or normative integration; consensus-based decision-making, they note, tends to produce minimal common denominators rather than ambitious joint commitments, a pattern consistent with what this paper terms institutional convergence without security convergence. The Clingendael Institute (2025) similarly frames 2024 as a year of "enormous and sudden expansion" for BRICS, driven as much by geopolitical opportunism among incoming members as by any coherent common agenda, and argues this expansion has itself accelerated the emergence of a more multipolar global order, requiring outside actors such as the European Union to engage BRICS states on the basis of shared utility rather than shared values.

2.6 India's own multilateral positioning.

Literature on India's own BRICS posture consistently emphasizes that New Delhi approaches the grouping instrumentally, through the lens of strategic autonomy and issue-based cooperation, rather than as an anti-Western ideological project (Rajeev, 2025). Jamali and Liu (2024) extend this observation theoretically, arguing that India's engagement with contested regional multilateral institutions is best understood through a dual logic of "institutional balancing" using multiple, sometimes rival, institutions to maximize bargaining leverage combined with a deliberate effort to avoid the dilemmas that typically confront rising powers forced to choose between competing institutional architectures. This framing is directly relevant to India's simultaneous participation in BRICS, the SCO, the Quad, and connectivity projects spanning both Western-backed and Russia/Iran-oriented corridors, discussed further in Section 8 below.

2.7 Connection to the Camp David-Abraham Accords structural distinction

A further point of relevance, drawn from broader scholarship on the evolution of West Asian diplomacy since 1978, concerns the structural difference between the Camp David Accords and the Abraham Accords as models of regional peacemaking. Camp David was a bilateral, US-mediated settlement between Egypt and Israel, negotiated within a Cold War bipolar structure and focused narrowly on ending a specific state of war. The Abraham Accords, by contrast, were a multilateral normalization process negotiated within an already multipolarizing international system, oriented as much toward shared threat perception of Iran and toward economic and technological cooperation as toward resolving any specific bilateral conflict. This structural shift from bipolar, conflict-terminating diplomacy to multipolar, threat-and-opportunity-driven normalization is itself a precursor to the institutional convergence this paper documents: the Abraham Accords already demonstrated that West Asian diplomacy could be organized around economic and technological logics rather than purely military security logics, priming the region for the kind of institutional, non-security-driven convergence that BRICS enlargement would later extend toward the IOR.

2.8 The gap

What existing literature has not yet examined in a systematic way is the interaction between these several bodies of scholarship: the specific claim that BRICS enlargement functions as a mechanism of regional security complex change connecting the IOR and West Asia, and whether this change is best captured by RSCT's existing typology of overlay and penetration or requires a new conceptual category. The SCO precedent literature (Papageorgiou & Jamali, 2024) comes closest, but treats Gulf-Eurasian institutional engagement as a foreign-policy diversification strategy rather than as a question of regional security complex boundary change in the RSCT sense. This paper addresses that gap directly, treating BRICS enlargement not simply as a diplomatic development but as a theoretically significant case of regional security architecture in flux.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Core RSCT concepts

Buzan and Wæver (2003) distinguish several mechanisms by which a regional security complex's boundaries or internal structure can change. "Overlay" describes a condition in which an external power's presence is so dominant that it suppresses the region's indigenous security dynamics, as was the case with superpower overlay during the Cold War. "Penetration" describes a lesser degree of external involvement, in which outside powers form alignments with regional actors without fully suppressing local dynamics. A third possibility, less developed in the original text, is structural transformation from within, driven by changes in the polarity or amity/enmity patterns of the regional actors themselves.

3.2 The gap in the typology

None of these three mechanisms adequately describes a situation in which two previously separate complexes are drawn together not through military overlay, not through bilateral alignment, but through joint membership in a multilateral economic and diplomatic institution whose original purpose (coordinating the Global South's position in international economic governance) had little to do with regional security as such. BRICS was not created to manage Gulf-IOR security relations; its enlargement nonetheless has that effect as a byproduct of pursuing other objectives energy cooperation, de-dollarization, and development financing chief among them (de Carvalho *et al.,* 2025).

3.3 Institutional convergence as a conceptual addition

This paper proposes "institutional convergence" as a named third pathway of RSC boundary change, distinct from both overlay and penetration. Institutional convergence is defined here as a process by which actors from previously distinct regional security complexes become bound together through shared membership in a common multilateral institution, generating material interdependence (trade, financing, connectivity) that increases the frequency and density of inter-complex interaction, without necessarily altering the underlying securitization patterns the threat perceptions, rivalries, and alliance structures internal to each original complex. Institutional convergence, on this reading, can proceed at a different pace and along a different axis than security convergence; the two need not move together, and this paper's central empirical claim is that in the IOR-West Asia case, they have not.

3.4 Operationalizing indicators

To assess institutional convergence empirically, this paper examines four indicators: (a) formal multilateral membership overlap (which states from each complex now sit inside the same institution); (b) material linkages such as energy trade flows, currency settlement patterns, and development-bank financing; (c) connectivity infrastructure spanning both regions (IMEC, INSTC, Chabahar); and (d) the persistence or absence of security convergence, measured through continuing bilateral tensions, divergent threat perceptions, and disagreement within joint declarations.

3.5 Relation to Middle Power Theory

The institutional convergence framework developed here also intersects with Middle Power Theory, which characterizes states such as India, Indonesia, and South Africa as actors that lack the unilateral capacity to reshape global order on their own but can meaningfully influence outcomes through coalition-building, niche diplomacy, and bridging roles between larger powers and smaller states (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). A middle power reading of India's position is a natural complement to the RSCT-based argument developed in this paper: if institutional convergence between the IOR and West Asia is occurring primarily through BRICS rather than through traditional security alliances, then a middle power such as India well placed institutionally but without the capacity to resolve the underlying Iran-Gulf or India-Pakistan rivalries which is exactly the kind of actor best positioned to manage, without necessarily resolving, the resulting institutional-security gap. This paper does not treat Middle Power Theory as a competing framework to RSCT, but as a complementary lens for understanding why a state in India's structural position would rationally choose to deepen institutional convergence while avoiding any deeper security commitments that convergence might otherwise imply.

3.6 Distinguishing institutional convergence from Acharya's multiplexity

It is worth briefly distinguishing this paper's proposed concept from Amitav Acharya's related notion of a "multiplex world order" (Acharya, 2014), which de Carvalho et al. (2025) apply directly to BRICS. Multiplexity describes a broader systemic condition of overlapping, non-hierarchical centers of power and institutional authority at the global level. Institutional convergence, as used here, operates at a narrower, more specific analytical level: it describes a mechanism of regional security complex boundary change, applicable to a specific pair of regions (the IOR and West Asia) rather than to the international system as a whole. The two concepts are compatible multiplexity may well be the systemic condition that makes regional institutional convergence of the kind documented here more likely to occur but they operate at different levels of analysis and answer different questions.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, historical-comparative method consistent with the broader approach used in the author's doctoral research. It draws on primary documentary sources the Johannesburg II Declaration (2023), the Kazan Declaration (2024), and the Rio/Brasília Declaration (2025) alongside secondary academic literature on RSCT, IOR and West Asian security studies, and BRICS/multipolarity scholarship. The analysis proceeds by first reconstructing the IOR and West Asian regional security complexes as they stood prior to the 2024 BRICS enlargement (Section 5), then tracing the specific institutional mechanisms through which BRICS enlargement has connected actors from both complexes (Section 6), before testing the resulting pattern against Buzan and Wæver's typology of regional change (Section 7). This method is appropriate to a puzzle that is fundamentally about institutional and diplomatic process rather than about quantifiable material capabilities, and it mirrors the qualitative, document-based approach commonly used in RSCT-informed case studies of the Gulf and South Asia (Han & Hakimian, 2019; Ullah & Xinlei, 2024).

This methodological choice carries an important limitation that should be stated plainly. Because BRICS enlargement is a recent phenomenon (2024–2026), the empirical record available for analysis is necessarily incomplete: many of the material linkages discussed in Section 6, including renminbi settlement shares and New Development Bank disbursement patterns to new Middle Eastern members, remain in early and evolving stages, and figures cited from recent reporting should be understood as indicative rather than final. The paper compensates for this by triangulating across multiple independent sources official BRICS declarations, specialist regional reporting, and peer-reviewed academic analysis wherever such triangulation is possible, and by explicitly flagging points of ongoing ambiguity, such as Saudi Arabia's accession status, rather than resolving them prematurely.

5. Mapping the Two Regional Security Complexes Prior to 2024

5.1 The Indian Ocean Region

Prior to 2024, the IOR's security dynamics centered on three interlocking elements: the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry; India's growing preoccupation with China's expanding naval presence and port-access agreements across the littoral, particularly following the 2020 Galwan clashes; and India's own search for an appropriate security role, oscillating between the expansive rhetoric of "net security provider" after 2011 and the more modest "preferred security partner" framing adopted around 2020 (Roy-Chaudhury, 2022). India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy, launched in 2015, formalized this ambition, emphasizing capacity-building partnerships with island and littoral states rather than unilateral power projection. Throughout this period, extra-regional powers the United States, France, and increasingly China maintained varying degrees of presence, but none exercised the kind of totalizing overlay associated with Cold War superpower dynamics; the complex remained, in Buzan and Wæver's terms, substantially shaped by its own indigenous rivalry structure.

5.2 West Asia

The West Asian complex, and particularly its Gulf sub-complex, remained centered through this period on the Iran-Saudi rivalry, itself long characterized in both scholarly and popular discourse through a sectarian Shia-Sunni lens, though RSCT-informed scholarship has cautioned against reducing the rivalry to sectarianism alone, emphasizing instead its roots in competing regional political projects (Han & Hakimian, 2019). The 2020 Abraham Accords added a further axis to this complex by formalizing diplomatic normalization between Israel and several Gulf states, altering the region's amity/enmity map without resolving the underlying Iran-Gulf tension. A tentative Saudi-Iranian détente, brokered in 2023, further complicated the picture, introducing a period of cautious diplomatic engagement even as underlying strategic distrust persisted (Ullah & Xinlei, 2024). Throughout this period, American security guarantees continued to anchor Gulf states' defense postures, even as several most visibly the UAE and Saudi Arabia began visibly hedging through parallel engagement with China and, eventually, BRICS.

5.3 The Abraham Accords as an internal West Asian re-alignment

It bears emphasis that the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and subsequently other Arab states, represented an internal reconfiguration of the West Asian complex's own amity/enmity map rather than a merger with any external complex. The Accords realigned several Gulf states' threat perception away from an undifferentiated "Arab-Israeli conflict" framing and toward a shared concern with Iranian influence, but did not by themselves draw IOR actors into the resulting security arrangement, nor did they alter India's own security posture in the Gulf. This distinction matters for the present analysis: it establishes that West Asia has demonstrated a capacity for significant internal RSCT-consistent change (shifting alliance patterns among existing complex members) even before BRICS enlargement introduced the qualitatively different, institutionally driven convergence process this paper examines.

5.4 China's expanding footprint as a connecting thread

A further pre-2024 development worth noting is China's simultaneously growing footprint in both the IOR and West Asia, evident in Belt and Road Initiative port investments across the Indian Ocean littoral and in Beijing's expanding energy purchases and diplomatic engagement including its 2023 brokering of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in the Gulf. China's presence in both regions prior to 2024 arguably constitutes a precursor to the institutional convergence this paper documents, since it demonstrates that a single external actor's simultaneous engagement across both complexes was already increasing their mutual relevance to one another before BRICS enlargement formalized this connection multilaterally. In RSCT terms, however, this earlier Chinese presence more closely resembles limited penetration than convergence, since it did not yet involve joint institutional membership binding IOR and West Asian states together in a shared multilateral framework.

5.5 Structural separation

Despite India's own extensive bilateral energy and diaspora ties to the Gulf, and despite this pre-existing Chinese connecting presence, the IOR and West Asian complexes remained, through 2023, largely distinct in RSCT terms: their principal rivalries (India-Pakistan and India-China on one side; Iran-Saudi and the Arab-Israeli axis on the other) involved different core actors, different alliance structures, and different external patrons, with only limited institutional overlap connecting the two beyond bilateral energy relationships, China's parallel bilateral engagement, and India's own naval presence in the northern Arabian Sea.

6. BRICS Enlargement as a Convergence Mechanism

6.1 The 2024 expansion wave

The Johannesburg summit of August 2023 invited six states — Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to join BRICS effective 1 January 2024. Argentina's incoming government under Javier Milei withdrew its application before accession; the remaining five proceeded, though Saudi Arabia's position has remained distinctively unresolved. Multiple sources confirm that Riyadh accepted the invitation in principle but has, as of mid-2026, still not formally deposited instruments of accession, a position widely interpreted as a deliberate hedge intended to preserve its security relationship with Washington (Magid, El Dahan, & Saini, 2026). Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE, by contrast, became full members from January 2024, with Indonesia added in January 2025, bringing the bloc to eleven full members by 2026.

6.2 Material linkages

The institutional convergence this paper identifies rests substantially on material and financial interdependence rather than formal security cooperation. China's role as the largest single trade partner of every Middle Eastern BRICS member is central here: recent trade data indicate substantial Chinese crude imports from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, alongside a growing though still minority share of renminbi-denominated oil settlement, illustrating the bloc's gradual, incremental movement away from dollar-centric energy trade. The New Development Bank, though modest in scale relative to Western-anchored multilateral lenders, has extended financing to several member states, reinforcing a parallel if not yet fully independent financial architecture (de Carvalho *et al.,* 2025).

6.3 Connectivity infrastructure

Two competing connectivity corridors further illustrate the material convergence between the IOR and West Asia. IMEC, announced at the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi and backed jointly by India, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the European Union, envisions a multimodal corridor linking Indian ports to Europe via the Gulf, incorporating shipping, rail, energy pipelines, and digital infrastructure (Hussain & Shafer, 2025; Middle East Institute, 2026). The INSTC, by contrast, connects India to Russia and Northern Europe via Iranian territory, and has become an increasingly prioritized alternative logistics route for Iran and Russia amid continuing Western sanctions pressure (Middle East Monitor, 2026). Both corridors run through the same geographic seam between the IOR and West Asia, and both depend on Indian participation, positioning New Delhi simultaneously inside two connectivity projects that reflect divergent geopolitical alignments within the same expanded BRICS membership. Notably, IMEC's momentum has been substantially disrupted by regional instability following the Gaza war, underscoring that connectivity convergence remains fragile and reversible rather than settled (Hussain & Shafer, 2025).

6.4 The Strait of Hormuz as the physical seam

If BRICS enlargement supplies the institutional glue connecting the IOR and West Asian complexes, the Strait of Hormuz remains the physical chokepoint through which that connection is materially expressed. Roughly one-fifth of global oil consumption, and close to a third of global maritime crude trade, transits this single waterway, with China and India together receiving nearly half of the crude that passes through it (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2026; International Energy Agency, 2026). The great majority of Gulf crude bound for India, China, and other Asian markets transits this narrow waterway, meaning that any security disruption there whether from Iran-Gulf tension, Red Sea spillover, or wider Iran-Israel conflict simultaneously threatens the energy security of India's IOR-facing economy and the export revenues of West Asian BRICS members alike. This creates a paradoxical situation in which India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE share an overlapping material interest in Hormuz's stability even as their broader security relationships with one another (and with the United States) remain unaligned. This is institutional and economic convergence operating directly atop unresolved security divergence, and it is arguably the clearest single illustration of the pattern this paper identifies: shared vulnerability to a chokepoint does not, by itself, produce a shared security community.

6.5 Institutional friction inside the bloc

Despite this material convergence, BRICS enlargement has simultaneously exposed sharp internal disagreements that indicate the absence of corresponding security convergence. At the September 2024 BRICS foreign ministers' meeting, both Egypt and Ethiopia declined to sign the joint communiqué, reflecting disagreement over UN Security Council reform and positioning on Middle East issues. Iran's inclusion has also strained relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which maintain close security ties with the United States even as they participate in the same bloc as Tehran. During the 2025 Israel-Iran conflict, GCC states displayed visibly divergent postures toward both Iran and Israel with the UAE explicitly naming Iran as its principal security threat while Oman and Qatar directed sharper criticism at Israel, and Saudi Arabia attempting to occupy a balancing position between the two camps illustrating that shared BRICS membership has not produced anything resembling a unified Gulf security posture (Institute for International Political Studies, 2026). Saudi Arabia's own continuing refusal to formally accede to full BRICS membership, even while participating in its working groups and summits, is itself an emblem of this same pattern: Riyadh has been content to capture the economic and diplomatic benefits of institutional proximity to BRICS while deliberately withholding the fuller commitment that might be read as a security realignment away from Washington.

6.6 The New Development Bank as institutional infrastructure

The New Development Bank (NDB), established by the original five BRICS members in 2014 and headquartered in Shanghai, is the bloc's most concrete institutional achievement to date, having extended tens of billions of dollars in financing for infrastructure and sustainable development projects across member states even before the 2024 enlargement; by the end of 2024, cumulative project approvals stood at roughly $39 billion across some 92 projects (Tamonan, 2025). The NDB's extension of eligibility to new members, including Egypt and the UAE, formally embeds these West Asian states within a shared multilateral financial institution alongside India for the first time, creating a channel for joint infrastructure financing that could, in principle, directly fund IOR-West Asia connectivity projects. In practice, however, the NDB's lending capacity remains modest relative to Western-anchored multilateral development banks, and de Carvalho, Anand, and Naidu (2025) note that this and other BRICS institutional innovations function more as parallel mechanisms operating alongside the existing international financial architecture than as genuine alternatives to it. This reinforces the paper's broader claim: even the bloc's most tangible shared institution has so far produced incremental, supplementary integration rather than the kind of deep structural interdependence that might be expected to accompany genuine regional security convergence.

6.7 Bilateral IMEC-specific frictions

The IMEC corridor illustrates the same convergence-without-alignment pattern from a different angle. Bashir, Vaid, Fayaz, and Bhat (2025) note that IMEC's potential for India and the wider West Asia region is substantial but remains constrained by unresolved political and logistical challenges, including regulatory harmonization across jurisdictions, financing gaps, and the corridor's vulnerability to precisely the kind of regional instability that a security-divergent West Asia continues to generate. The corridor's stalled momentum following the Gaza war is a direct illustration: an economic convergence project premised partly on Saudi-Israeli normalization was frozen by a security crisis that BRICS membership, shared by several of the corridor's own backers, did nothing to prevent or resolve.

7. Analysis: Merger, Overlay, or a New Pathway?

Tested against Buzan and Wæver's (2003) own typology, the pattern documented in Section 6 fits neither "overlay" nor "penetration" cleanly. It is not overlay, because no single external power's presence dominates or suppresses the indigenous security dynamics of either the IOR or West Asia; BRICS itself is not an external power but a multilateral forum whose largest members (China, India, Russia) have partially divergent interests. It is not straightforward penetration either, since penetration in RSCT's original sense describes bilateral alignment-seeking by outside powers with regional actors, whereas BRICS enlargement operates multilaterally and was driven substantially by the initiative of the incoming West Asian states themselves, seeking diversification and hedging rather than externally imposed alignment.

What the evidence instead supports is the paper's proposed third pathway: institutional convergence without security convergence. The material and institutional indicators outlined in Section 6 that shared BRICS membership, growing energy and currency linkages, and overlapping connectivity corridors demonstrate a genuine and accelerating institutional binding of IOR and West Asian actors. Yet the persistence of the Egypt-Ethiopia rift, the continuing Iran-UAE/Saudi tension, and the sharply divergent Gulf responses to the 2025 Israel-Iran conflict demonstrate that this institutional binding has not been accompanied by any convergence in the underlying securitization patterns that RSCT treats as constitutive of a security complex. The two regions remain, in security terms, substantially as distinct as before 2024; what has changed is the density of the institutional architecture connecting their principal actors.

This finding has a broader theoretical implication for RSCT: it suggests that regional security complexes can be institutionally bridged well before or even without ever being securitized as a single complex, and that scholars applying RSCT to contemporary multipolar institutions such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, or an enlarged G20 should treat institutional and security convergence as analytically separable processes rather than assuming that closer institutional ties necessarily herald a genuine merger of security dynamics.

7.1 Comparing the SCO and BRICS pathways

The comparison with Gulf states' earlier SCO engagement (Papageorgiou & Jamali, 2024) sharpens this claim further. Both cases exhibit the same signature: individual, non-uniform Gulf state engagement (Iran as full SCO member versus Saudi Arabia and Qatar as dialogue partners; a similarly uneven pattern of full membership and hedged accession within BRICS), motivated by diversification rather than a shared regional security agenda, and coexisting with continuing reliance on the United States for core security guarantees. That the same behavioral pattern recurs across two different Eurasian-oriented multilateral institutions, roughly a decade apart, suggests that institutional convergence without security convergence may be a more general feature of how Gulf states manage multipolarity, rather than an idiosyncrasy specific to BRICS. This strengthens the case for treating institutional convergence as a distinct, recurring RSCT-relevant pathway meriting its own analytical category, rather than as a one-off anomaly explainable solely by BRICS's particular 2023–2024 enlargement politics.

7.2 Why RSCT's original typology under-predicts this outcome

Buzan and Wæver's (2003) original framework was developed principally against a Cold War and immediate post-Cold War backdrop in which the dominant mechanisms of inter-complex connection were military and alliance-based. The theory was consequently well equipped to explain superpower overlay and great-power penetration, but it had comparatively little to say about a scenario in which middle and rising powers voluntarily construct shared multilateral economic institutions that, as a side effect rather than a primary purpose, draw separate regional security complexes into closer institutional proximity. The BRICS-driven IOR-West Asia case suggests this is a growing and non-trivial gap in the theory's explanatory reach, particularly as multipolarity produces more such South-South institutional arrangements whose primary logic is economic and diplomatic rather than security-driven, yet whose membership overlaps happen to straddle established RSCT regional boundaries.

8. India's Strategic Position at the Institutional Seam

India occupies a distinctive position at the seam between these two increasingly institutionally connected but security-wise still-separate complexes. As the IOR's principal resident power and self-styled preferred security partner (Roy-Chaudhury, 2022), India retains a deep stake in the Indian Ocean's stability, while its BRICS membership since founding, its expanding energy relationship with Gulf and Iranian suppliers, and its sponsorship of both IMEC and continued engagement with the INSTC place it simultaneously inside both of the connectivity projects that materially bind the two regions together.

This position aligns closely with the broader pattern of Indian foreign policy scholarship, which characterizes New Delhi's contemporary approach as "multi-alignment" an evolution of Cold War-era non-alignment that emphasizes issue-based partnerships and diversification across multiple, sometimes competing, platforms rather than a permanent bloc commitment (Rajeev, 2025). India's simultaneous participation in BRICS, the Quad, the SCO, IMEC, and the INSTC exemplifies this pattern: rather than resolving the tension between Western-aligned and Russia/Iran-aligned connectivity projects, India deliberately keeps both options open, treating strategic autonomy as a hedge against the volatility of an institutionally converging but still securitized IOR-West Asia seam.

This positioning carries both opportunity and risk for India. The opportunity lies in India's ability to act as a genuine interlocutor between BRICS partners whose bilateral relations are otherwise strained a role consistent with middle-power diplomacy more broadly, which emphasizes coalition-building and issue-based leadership rather than unilateral power projection. Jamali and Liu's (2024) concept of institutional balancing captures this dynamic precisely: India's simultaneous membership in BRICS and the SCO alongside China, in the Quad alongside the United States, and as sponsor of both IMEC and the INSTC, allows New Delhi to extract bargaining leverage from each institution without becoming structurally dependent on, or hostage to, any single one. Applied to the IOR-West Asia seam specifically, this means India can engage Iran through the INSTC and Chabahar even as it deepens Gulf-Israel-linked connectivity through IMEC, without either engagement being read by its partners as a definitive strategic choice against the other.

India's own stake in this convergence is heightened by the fact that its energy security is disproportionately exposed to precisely the West Asian security dynamics this paper argues remain unresolved. India imports the substantial majority of its crude oil requirements, and a large share of this trade transits Gulf waters and the Strait of Hormuz before reaching Indian ports; correspondingly, a very high proportion of India's overall trade by volume moves by sea through IOR shipping lanes. This dual dependency means India cannot treat its BRICS-mediated institutional ties to Gulf energy producers as a substitute for direct, bilateral management of Gulf security risk: a disruption at Hormuz driven by Iran-Gulf or Iran-Israel tension would harm India's energy security regardless of whether Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are all sitting at the same BRICS table. This is the sharpest practical illustration of the paper's central claim available from India's own vantage point: institutional co-membership with Gulf energy suppliers has not reduced India's underlying vulnerability to West Asian security shocks, precisely because that co-membership has not been accompanied by any parallel convergence in the security relationships that actually govern the risk of such shocks occurring.

The risk lies in the fragility of institutional convergence identified in Section 6: connectivity corridors such as IMEC remain vulnerable to regional instability, and India's continued balancing between BRICS partners with divergent, sometimes openly hostile, threat perceptions of one another (as between Iran and the UAE) tests the limits of multi-alignment as a sustainable long-term posture rather than a temporary hedge. The Gulf states' own SCO experience (Papageorgiou & Jamali, 2024) suggests that this kind of diversification strategy is more durable when pursued individually and incrementally than when a state is drawn into taking sides on a specific crisis precisely the scenario the 2025 Israel-Iran conflict period created for GCC members. India's chairmanship of BRICS in 2026, culminating in the New Delhi summit scheduled for September, offers a concrete opportunity to shape how far institutional convergence between the IOR and West Asia proceeds, including through its stated chairmanship priorities on CBDC interoperability, AI governance, and climate finance, but it does not by itself resolve the underlying security separation this paper has identified, nor should it be expected to.

9. Limitations and Way Forward

This paper's conclusions rest on qualitative analysis of publicly available summit declarations, secondary academic literature, and reported diplomatic developments, rather than on interview data, archival material, or quantitative trade and financial flow analysis. Given BRICS enlargement's recency, much of the underlying material linkage data particularly on the actual, as opposed to projected, scale of renminbi oil settlement, NDB disbursement to Middle Eastern members, and IMEC/INSTC freight volumes remains preliminary and likely to be substantially revised as more complete data becomes available. Saudi Arabia's own accession status remains genuinely unresolved as of this writing, and any future formalization of full Saudi membership would itself constitute an important test of this paper's central claim: if Saudi accession is eventually accompanied by a corresponding softening of Riyadh's security posture toward Iran or a corresponding hedge away from Washington, this would suggest that institutional and security convergence can eventually align, contrary to this paper's finding of durable decoupling through 2026. Future research should track this question longitudinally, alongside a closer, more granular comparison between the SCO's own two-decade history of Gulf engagement and BRICS's much more recent enlargement, to assess whether institutional convergence of this kind has a predictable half-life or tends, over a longer horizon, to eventually produce the security convergence RSCT would associate with genuine regional security complex merger.

10. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that BRICS enlargement since 2024 has produced a distinctive pattern of regional change connecting the Indian Ocean Region and West Asia one that existing Regional Security Complex Theory, built around the mechanisms of overlay and penetration, does not adequately capture. Institutional convergence, as this paper has defined and operationalized it, better describes the observed pattern: growing material and institutional interdependence between actors from two historically distinct regional security complexes, proceeding without a corresponding convergence in the underlying rivalries, threat perceptions, and alliance structures that originally defined those complexes as separate. The persistence of Egypt-Ethiopia and Iran-Gulf frictions inside BRICS, alongside the accelerating energy, financial, and connectivity linkages documented in Section 6, together illustrate that institutional and security convergence can and do proceed along different tracks and at different speeds.

For India, this decoupling is simultaneously an opportunity and a constraint. It allows New Delhi to deepen its institutional presence across both regions without being forced into the kind of binary alignment choices that a genuine security merger would impose, consistent with its broader strategic autonomy posture and with the institutional-balancing logic identified by Jamali and Liu (2024). At the same time, it means India's ambitions in both regions as IOR security partner and as sponsor of Gulf-linked connectivity corridors remain hostage to security dynamics that BRICS membership alone cannot resolve, as the Gaza-war disruption of IMEC illustrated concretely.

The theoretical contribution of this paper, in sum, is to name and operationalize a pathway of regional security complex change institutional convergence without security convergence that Buzan and Wæver's original RSCT typology, developed for a bipolar and early post-Cold War world, did not anticipate. As South-South multilateral institutions such as BRICS, the SCO, and their successors continue to expand, and as connectivity corridors increasingly straddle traditionally separate regions, this pathway is likely to recur elsewhere, and RSCT scholarship would benefit from treating institutional and security convergence as separable analytical tracks rather than assuming the former reliably predicts the latter. For India specifically, the practical implication is that its BRICS chairmanship, its IMEC and INSTC investments, and its Indian Ocean security posture should continue to be managed as related but distinct undertakings, each requiring its own diplomatic and strategic attention, rather than treated as components of a single, already-unified West Asia-IOR security architecture that this paper's evidence suggests does not yet exist.

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