



# BRICS and the Persian Gulf Crisis: Lessons for ASEAN's Strategic Coherence?

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## **BRICS and the Persian Gulf Crisis: Lessons for ASEAN's Strategic Coherence?**

*By Nazia Hussain*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Persian Gulf crisis exposes a structural limitation that diverse groupings like BRICS face when their members' immediate interests diverge. For ASEAN, that limitation has implications it cannot afford to overlook as major-power rivalry intensifies.*

### **COMMENTARY**

BRICS is often cast in extremes. When more than 30 countries expressed interest in [joining](#) after the 2023 Johannesburg summit, the grouping was hailed in some quarters as a prospective alternative to the Western-led order. However, when recent tensions in the Persian Gulf exposed its limits, sceptics were quick to dismiss it as strategically inconsequential.

Both framings miss the structural limitation the Gulf crisis has exposed – one that emerges in multilateral groupings when rhetorical alignment must translate into collective action amid divergent interests. A similar limitation is visible within ASEAN, where uneven economic exposure and strategic asymmetries among member states hinder collective responses.

### **The Gulf Crisis and BRICS' Structural Limitation**

The Gulf crisis has laid bare the gap between BRICS' expanding diplomatic reach and its weak strategic coherence. The grouping, which now includes Iran, the UAE, Egypt, and Ethiopia, among others, can agree on broad themes of sovereignty, peace, and reform of the international order. But when members find themselves on opposing sides of an active conflict – as Iran and the UAE have – that rhetorical

overlap proves too thin to sustain a common strategic line. More than a month on, BRICS has still not issued a joint statement on the conflict.

The lack of a collective response is to be expected, as BRICS members have diverse economic and strategic relationships and, in moments of crisis, prioritise their own energy security, trade access, and capital exposure more heavily than any shared position the grouping might take. India, the current BRICS chair, may wish to project the grouping as influential, but its calculations are shaped by dependence on Gulf stability, energy supplies, and secure shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. New Delhi's [engagement](#) with Tehran during the crisis has been bilateral – focused on securing safe passage for Indian ships through the Strait of Hormuz rather than on coordinating a collective BRICS response.

The UAE values BRICS as a platform for amplifying its role in global governance, but not at the expense of its security relationship with the United States. Iran enters the crisis from a fundamentally different position, as both a BRICS member and the target of US-Israeli military action. Even China, often assumed to be the bloc's dominant voice, has trodden carefully. Beijing's deepening ties with both Tehran and the Gulf monarchies make any visible BRICS alignment costly. Consequently, BRICS finds reformist language easier to agree on than a common posture when conflict threatens to impact concrete national interests.

BRICS's heterogeneity, widened further by recent expansion, compounds a structural limitation: members now occupy too many overlapping and competing strategic orbits to sustain collective action when their immediate interests diverge. Russia's war in Ukraine exposed the same limitation years earlier. Despite Russia being a founding member, the war has never drawn a collective BRICS endorsement. The restraint reflects the substantial Western economic and diplomatic ties most members retain, together with India's strategic autonomy and Brazil's non-aligned tradition – none of which members were willing to compromise for the sake of a unified stance.

### **ASEAN Cohesion Under External Pressure**

While ASEAN is more institutionalised, regionally anchored, and supported by deeper habits of consultation than BRICS, it faces the same underlying pressure on strategic cohesion. Member states do not experience major power rivalry from the same position, nor do they weigh security and economic consequences equally. As these asymmetries widen, economic dependence risks hardening into political divergence, and institutional density alone may not be enough to prevent it.

ASEAN member states Cambodia and Laos are more dependent on Chinese infrastructure, finance and trade, which narrows their political room for manoeuvre when regional issues implicate Beijing. Cambodia's refusal to include any mention of the South China Sea in the joint communique at the conclusion of the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in 2012 underscores how readily those divergences translate into institutional paralysis.

More recently, Trump's 2025 Liberation Day tariffs highlighted the difficulty of sustaining ASEAN cohesion when economic pressure is distributed across member states unevenly. ASEAN's collective defiance faded within weeks as Vietnam and Cambodia – facing some of the [highest](#) tariff rates among ASEAN member states at 46 and 49 per cent, respectively – moved to strike bilateral deals with Washington. Most major ASEAN economies ultimately faced similar [tariff rates](#) of 19-20 per cent, but only after making country-specific concessions, ranging from commitments on [Boeing](#) and [LNG](#) purchases to measures targeting Chinese [transshipment](#). In effect, ASEAN members ended up on broadly comparable terms while bargaining separately and paying different political and economic costs.

## **Closing the Capacity Gap**

ASEAN has increasingly recognised the strategic risks arising from the uneven exposure of its member states to external economic and geopolitical pressures. The [ASEAN Economic Community \(AEC\) Strategic Plan 2026-2030](#), for instance, acknowledges geopolitical tensions, shifting trade flows, and supply chain fragility as strategic concerns, and sets out objectives for supply chain resilience, energy and food security, digital connectivity, and stronger positioning in global value chains. Longer-standing instruments, such as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), established to narrow development gaps between the CLMV countries and the rest of ASEAN, reflect an understanding that uneven capacity within ASEAN carries political and strategic consequences.

However, these responses remain largely at the framework level. ASEAN has yet to develop common instruments for addressing strategic trade exposure, technology restrictions, investment screening, or wider forms of economic coercion. Recognition of the strategic risks has advanced faster than the collective capacity to address them. ASEAN issued [a joint statement](#) on the Gulf crisis, affirming freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan also [called for](#) the swift ratification of the ASEAN Petroleum Security Agreement, the acceleration of the ASEAN Power Grid, and the entry into force of the Upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement. Had these instruments been in place, ASEAN would have been better equipped to absorb the impact of the crisis.

Building these instruments will require not only political will from member states, but also a collective agreement on what sovereignty means in areas such as trade, defence, technology, and investment scrutiny, where ASEAN has traditionally left decisions to individual member states. Without such agreement, the deeper challenge is not formal disunity but the gradual erosion of strategic coherence. ASEAN may continue to convene, issue statements, and claim centrality even as its capacity to shape regional outcomes steadily erodes.

The groundwork for stronger collective instruments is underway. The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), expected to be signed in 2026 as the first binding regional digital economy agreement, would mark a significant step towards the collective instruments ASEAN needs – provided its commitments are upheld in practice. But as the BRICS case shows, rhetorical alignment can break down when

members' immediate interests diverge. The broader task for ASEAN remains to transform institutional depth into collective capacity before external pressures expose the gap between them.

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