

Johannesburg Summit: A Critical Look at BRICS and Africa

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Undoubtedly the forthcoming 15th BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit August 22 – 24 in Johannesburg, South Africa, opens the door for critical multiple issues mostly relating to the irreversible processes of the emerging new world. While it seriously presents an opportunity to take meticulous stock of its wins and losses, strength and weaknesses, the summit has the imperative to examine the new paradigms, evaluate innovative directions and assess strategies for moving the organization farther in this re-configuring world.

The BRIC concept was created by the Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill, and the "S" was added after South Africa joined the group in 2010. But the first meeting of the group began in St Petersburg in 2005. It was simply referred to as RIC, which stood for Russia, India and China. Then, Brazil and subsequently South Africa joined later, which is why now it is popularly called BRICS. As rotating chair, South Africa first held the summit in 2013 in Durban, the second in July 2018 and now the third in August 2023.

Durban hosted African leaders, heads of the G20, representatives of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Caribbean Community. Since then, BRICS Five and African States have greatly strengthened and expanded their cooperation in the economy, politics and the humanitarian sphere. BRICS considers Africa is one of the world's most rapidly developing regions.

During the summit in South Africa, Russian President Vladimir Putin attended a meeting of BRICS leaders with delegation heads from invited African states and chairs of international associations. Those invited included the leaders from Africa, namely Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Gabon, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

I would like to remind and further emphasize that BRICS and the African States have similar development goals in many respects. In 2015, the BRICS summit in Russia adopted the

large-scale BRICS Strategy for Economic Partnership. In fact, during that gathering Putin's position was about involving African partners in the areas identified then: the economy, finance, and food security.

It was also based on the fact that Russia has always given priority to the development of relations with African countries, based on long-standing traditions of friendship and mutual assistance. Notwithstanding the long-list of pledges at the meeting in July 2018, a considerable part of the Russian initiatives was for localizing industrial businesses in Africa. Russia has consistently advocated for deepening organization's interaction with the African continent. It was that meeting Putin, for the first, mentioned the idea of holding a Russia-Africa summit with the participation of heads of African States.

Expanding BRICS Membership



With the forthcoming August 2023 summit, heated discussions and debates have been on the organization's expansion, adoption of alternative currency and various proposals to redesign its architecture with new comprehensive objectives and tasks within the context of the current geopolitical changes. This growing enthusiasm and interest for the BRICS has various underlying motivations, which have to be accommodated within the broader framework. There is the strong common motive for forming an alliance in a multipolar world.

As several media reports show, in my own monitoring and research assessment, a large number of Asian, African and Latin American States are interested in forging a full-fledged structural membership and possible cooperation with the BRICS. More than 20 States have formally applied to join BRICS. The authentic criteria and mechanism for the expansion of the organization is being developed.

South Africa's term as the rotating Chair of BRICS ends this August, as stipulated by the guidelines and rules, and will pass on the baton to Brazil. This implies that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has a lot more at hand this last-minute crucial moment. Tracking the developments of the organization especially this 2023 presidency of South Africa, there have been so many controversial questions which are still currently receiving enormous attention, including the South Africa's relationship with Russia, BRICS common currency as well as other global issues.

According to reports, BRICS is steadily or rather rapidly becoming an alternative organization for the Global South against the backdrop of the accusations of the United States and Europe together with their allies political dominance, hegemony and unipolar or unitary approach towards global problems, and especially those adversely affecting the

developing or the least developed nations. The emphasis is on geopolitical and development cooperation with non-Western States appears to be sliding, BRICS now attracting friends. Those lined up states are consolidating their growing desire to join BRICS.

Johannesburg summit, therefore, has the primary tasks now, developing along two aspects: by admitting new members and by strengthening cooperation of BRICS with potential new members. The possibility of expanding membership (for purposes of determining the principles, standards, criteria and procedures of this process) in the organization is still under discussions within the BRICS framework.

China and Russia have seemingly been pushing for the expansion of BRICS, soliciting support for the multipolar system of global governance instead of the existing rules-based unipolar directed by the United States. Often explained that a bigger BRICS primarily offers huge opportunities among the group members and for developing countries.

On the other side, BRICS researchers and analysts argue and believe that additional States will not be admitted to BRICS, but each organization's partner has the chance and will be able to choose a convenient mode of cooperation within the BRICS+ new structure. The argument holds the fact regarding re-titling BRICS. Therefore, it is highly likely to be the case, but this requires a consensus of all the members of BRICS.

More countries have become interested in joining the group: Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sudan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uruguay, Venezuela, Zimbabwe. This growing interest for the BRICS project has various underlying motivations, which have to be accommodated within the broader framework.

In advancing the discussion here, interesting to remind here that during the 14th BRICS summit successfully held in June 2022, President Xi Jinping emphasized at the meeting that BRICS countries gather not in a closed club or an exclusive circle, but a big family of mutual support and a partnership for win-win cooperation. At the same summit, BRICS leaders reached important common understanding about BRICS expansion and expressed support for discussion on the standards and procedures of the expansion.

Africa's Alliance with BRICS

South Africa, the first African State, joined the group on the initiative of China and Russia. Its membership has reflected and altered the organization's name, now known as BRICS. It has, since then, played significant roles hosting summits, influencing the organization's activities, and creating historic milestone in this 21st century world. South Africa can warmly be credited, first for its membership presence, and second for laying the pathways for strategic expansion plans to include African States. At least, South Africa has brought a tectonic shift in landscape, a transformative aspect when African States participated in BRICS plus Outreach in July 2018.

Russian President Vladimir Putin attended a meeting of BRICS leaders with delegations from invited African states and chairs of international associations that July 2018. And BRICS documents show the participating leaders of African States as Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Gabon, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

In practical terms, BRICS has recognized and welcomed Africans into its fold long ago.

“I am grateful to the President of the Republic of South Africa for organizing this representative meeting. In 2013 in Durban, BRICS leaders held a meeting with the heads of African states for the first time. We know that Africa is one of the world’s most rapidly developing regions, so its representation is important for BRICS,” Putin said in his introductory speech.

In awakening reality, African States are still seeking greater representation and louder instrumental voices on international platforms including the Group of Twenty (G20) and the United Nations.

BRICS together with majority of African States, the African Union and all the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are getting involved to halt the system of unipolarity. Without doubts, Africa has a common vision and unflinching interest that BRICS plays an essential role on the global multilateral stage. This Global South political movement consistently presents a fundamental coherent challenge to the West.

Dilma Rousseff at Russia-Africa Summit

At the Russia-Africa summit held late July 2023, during the high-profile line-up of speakers during the plenary session, former President of Brazil from 2011 to 2016, and now the new President of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), Dilma Rousseff, reaffirmed BRICS position towards building a more multilateral and multipolar world.



Dilma Rousseff meeting with President Putin on 26 July (Licensed under CC BY 4.0)

The BRICS New Development Bank now also includes Egypt, Bangladesh and the UAE, supports the development initiatives of developing nations on all continents just as other regional development banks do. These nations can count on agreements on using national currencies in trade transactions, according to Rousseff, the first female to hold the position.

The New Development Bank was established just eight years ago, in 2014, at the BRICS summit in Fortaleza. This bank is often called the BRICS bank because it was established by

the will of the five BRICS members but it has already outgrown this framework and is not limited to just these members. It works towards ensuring sustainable development and eliminating the threat of poverty and famine, and in the spirit of true multilateralism. The bank is working to share experiences and best practices of sustainable development.

Rousseff, however, stressed the fact that in loaning its funds, the bank is not dependent on external factors. The bank provides a platform for the development of the Global South. In this sense, the developing nations of all continents, especially Africa, Latin America and Asia are its strategic partners.

She believes participants should not be affected by problems that may arise in Western markets, and for this reason, it is developing its own transaction systems. The NDB receives money in different markets and in the currencies of all developing nations, not only in dollars or in euros. The NDB has already approved 98 projects in member states amounting in total to about US\$35 billion. It cooperates with the African Export-Import Bank and other banks engaged in economic and social development. It implements infrastructure and logistics projects aimed at improving living standards in the BRICS members.

We perfectly understand that the proposed expansion has admirable and beneficial geopolitical importance. Worth noting here that African States are readjusting their place in the multipolar world, moving to new emerging multinational centres such as BRICS. For many from Africa, it is an opportunity for something much newer within the spectrum of their internal development paradigm. Therefore, it has become increasingly attractive as a new stage for diplomacy and development financing.

In fact, reviewing and analysing the current emerging developments especially for the Global South, Africans are now describing it as an organization that can challenge the dominant United States and European-led global governance structures. And of course, there are also several arguments that China and India are equally emerging powers. There are visible signs that both consider Africa as their new playground, will probably compete with each other to 'impress' Africa with goodies like aid, soft loans or trade.

The NDB and BRICS Common Currency

Records indicate that BRICS are under-represented in the global financial architecture. Europe and the United States dominate institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Fully aware of this shortfall, BRICS established in 2015 its own National Development Bank. The idea for setting up the bank was first proposed by India at the 4th BRICS summit in 2012 held in Delhi, but was finally created three years later. It is a multilateral development bank established with an initial capital of US\$100 billion. According to its stipulated primary functions, NDB has to cooperate with international organizations and other financial entities, and provide technical assistance for projects to be supported by the Bank.

With the current global unstable and volatile situation creating skyrocketing uncertainties in global economic recovery, China have unreservedly shown its contribution for strengthening BRICS. Despite its large population of 1.5 billion which many have considered as an impediment, China pursues an admirable collaborative strategic diplomacy with external countries and among the BRICS.

For 16 years since its inception, China offers the largest financial support for the BRICS

National Development Bank, contributed tremendously to other directions including health, education and economic collaboration among the group. That is one reason why BRICS has gained extensive recognition.

More and more countries are willing and interested to become members of the organization, make joint efforts to overcome difficulties and challenges, and realize common development and prosperity. BRICS activities have expanded during the past few years. Now many States participated in the Outreach and BRICS plus segments of the organization. But now with the emerging new global order, BRICS seeks to expand its membership, consolidate its platform as an instrument for pushing against the existing rules-based order unipolar system.

A careful study and analysis monitored show that BRICS activities have expanded during the past few years. States participated in the Outreach and BRICS plus segments of the organization. There are also a number of African countries including Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal and Zimbabwe have also shown interest. Uruguay is part way through the process of joining, while Argentina, Cuba, Honduras and Saudi Arabia and a number of Asian States have expressed desire. Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt have joined since 2021, bringing its membership to eight. Egypt has already been involved for a fairly long time. Last December 2022, Egypt, the decision on its accession to the New Development Bank was made by BRICS.

According to media reports, Ennahar TV quoted Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune as saying that Algeria has applied to join the BRICS group and submitted a request to become a shareholder member of BRICS Bank with an amount of US\$1.5 billion.

In July, Tebboune visited China and had sought to join the BRICS to open new economic opportunities. Algeria is rich in oil and gas resources and seeking to diversify its economy and strengthen its partnership with members such as China. Already China plans to invest US\$36 billion in Algeria across sectors including manufacturing, new technology, the knowledge economy, transport and agriculture.

Charles Robertson, Chief Economist at Renaissance Capital, argues that “Russia and others in the BRICS would like to see larger power centres emerge to offer an alternative to that Western dominated construct. That is reasonable enough – providing there are countries with the money to backstop the new institutions, such as China supporting the BRICS bank, and if the countries offer an alternative vision that provides benefits to new members.”

In today’s changing conditions, BRICS has been very concerned about de-dollarization and strongly advocating for its own currency. Thus in the discussion, 26 July 2023 in St. Petersburg, Putin stressed doubtlessly that Rousseff uses her rich experience in public work and knowledge in this area to develop the institution. In today’s conditions, this is not easy to do, given what is happening in world finance and the use of the dollar as an instrument of political struggle. But the members of BRICS, are not ‘friends’ against someone, they work in each other’s interests. This applies to the financial sector.

“In general, we are good participants in this organization, we fulfill everything on time, all our obligations to it. We know that there is a question about the liquidity of the bank, there are some ideas that come from you, from your staff, and we will support this,” Putin said at the meeting with her. “Relations between BRICS members are developing in national currencies, and settlements are increasing. In this regard, the bank can also play a significant role in the development of joint activities.”

Putin's Perceptions on BRICS and Africa

Late July 2023, when the second Russia-Africa summit was held, Russian President Vladimir Putin underlined on Africa's new role and remnants of colonialism in the continent. Putin explicitly explained that Africa is turning into "a new center of power," and everybody will have to reckon with it. "The era of hegemony of one or several countries is receding into the past" – "however, not without resistance on the part of those who got used to their own uniqueness and monopoly in global affairs."

Without missing words, Putin unreservedly shared his objective thoughts, and Africans know these trends across the continent down the years. The situation in many regions of Africa still remains unstable particularly due to the West's 'divide and rule' policy. Which is why Russia, with consistency, favors or advocates for expanding the role of African representation, for instance, in the UN, including the Security Council: "It is high time to remedy historical injustice."

Taking a clear position on issues that affect the entire continent will be more productive. Moreso, with the process of geopolitics rapidly shifting, Africa leaders have to assess their external relationships in the context of their *national and cultural sovereignty*, to play a more active role *in resolving regional and global challenges*.

At this point of the analysis, it is also very necessary to take a glancy look at BRICS members' performance with Africa. Over the last two decades, partnerships with Africa have become central to China's geostrategic objectives. It has made significant investments to secure favorable media coverage to promote a positive view of China, to counter the influence of the United States.

As a strong member of BRICS, it has used the media to improve African perceptions. India and Brazil are doing something similar but on a comparatively lower scale. Smart African States, in an attempt to reset relations with global powers, are equally capitalizing on these new opportunities to improve aspects of development for the impoverished population. Whatever be the case, the potentials exist for African leaders to explore. BRICS in this emerging world has diverse opportunities for industrial, economic, agricultural, commercial and financial development.

Johannesburg as Summit Venue

The 15th summit will also discuss the expansion of the bank, which has admitted the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh and Egypt as members. Nevertheless, most of NDB related questions are on the agenda during the 15th BRICS summit scheduled for August 22 – 24 at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa.

That BRICS has the potential of becoming a global player is a fact, since more intend to join the group, and if we look carefully, each of them has significant assets to contribute: some have huge financial potential, others have huge demographic potential, others have expertise in particular industries. BRICS is simply consolidating its position to control economic development on a global scale and to vehemently oppose Western values and U.S. hegemony.

For China, this summit is a new opportunity to present its current projects, as well as its new initiatives, such as GDI (Global Development Initiative), GSI (Global Security Initiative), GCI

(Global Civilisation Initiative). The already ten-year old Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) currently covers 147 countries with more than 3,000 projects worth trillions of dollars.

Ahead of the summit, South Africa's Anil Sooklal said in a lecture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal that so far, representatives from more than 70 nations have been invited to attend, necessary security arrangements have been made and other pre-visit formalities have been completed. And that Russia's Vladimir Putin will participate via video (virtual) format. "This will be the largest gathering with foreign nations from the Global South coming together to discuss the current global challenges," Sooklal said.

South Africa's Foreign Ministry confirmed that Russia would be represented at this month's BRICS summit by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov after President Vladimir Putin decided not to attend in person due to a warrant for his arrest issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged war crimes in Ukraine. Kremlin also said an official decision reached "by mutual agreement" allows Putin to skip in-person participation.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has repeatedly said that BRICS as a dynamic group would usher in a new global development era that promises a system of more inclusive, sustainable and fair principles. BRICS group, in an expanded form, can support a sustainable and equitable global economic recovery.

Ramaphosa further believes that the BRICS is simply a highly-valuable platform fixed to strengthen ties with partner States in support of economic growth, development process and for discussing global economic problems and challenges, and above all for strengthening the role of developing States in the emerging multipolar world.

Formed officially in 2009-2010, the organization has struggled to have the kind of geopolitical influence that matches its collective economic reach. It also embodies a synergy of cultures and explores a model of genuine multilateral diplomacy. Its structure is formed in compliance with the 21st century realities. Efforts within its framework are based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and justice. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) collectively represent about 26% of the world's geographical area and about 42% of the world's population.

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