

The Aftermath of the BRICS Fifth Summit: The Contradictions of International Political Economy

Frank Gadiwele Lekaba¹

This brief seeks to analyse whether the new global actor consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), as an emerging political and institutional force of the South, can contend economically with the hegemony of the West. Can it manage to confront key socio-political and economic issues of the developing countries for their resolution in the interests of the vast majority of the people of its members and the rest of the South? Can BRICS be a force for transformation of the global governance organisations and institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN) and its Security Council, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO)? The brief seeks to address what other countries of the South hope and expect of BRICS in terms of their development and role within the international political economy.

Introduction

Scholars holding different political, economic and ideological positions have differing expectations on what should be the role of BRICS in promoting the economic development of its members and respective regions and the rest of the South. Some scholars and policymakers view BRICS as an organisation that is in a position to challenge and change the status quo of the global governance institutions, mainly the UN Security Council. This is in part because China and Russia are permanent members of the Security Council. The proponents of this view have deliberately ignored the role that might be played by these two powerful countries in *stalling* the debate around the restructuring of the UN, particularly its Security Council. Therefore this view is more theoretical than practical,

given that the international relations and foreign policy of countries are structurally informed by Palmerston's insight that in politics there are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, but only permanent interests.¹

China and Russia have so far not supported candidates from developing countries to serve in the global governance institutions in order to influence decisions from within. These two countries have often abstained from voting, despite their much-needed support in forwarding candidates from the BRICS regions to the centre of global governance organisations. In 2006, China abstained from voting when the candidate from India, Shashi Tharoor, was contesting Ban Ki-moon of South Korea for the position of UN Secretary-General. Ultimately, Ban Ki-moon was chosen. In 2012, both of these powerful BRICS

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countries supported Jim Yong Kim, the candidate suggested by the United States (US) to head the World Bank as its president, rather than the developing countries' candidate, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Finance Minister of Nigeria.

It might not serve the interests of China and Russia to have other BRICS members in the UN Security Council as permanent members, because at the moment these two countries enjoy the privilege and prestige of being the most politically powerful countries in BRICS owing to their position on the Security Council. Ironically, the agenda for the UN Security Council reform is the common interest bringing the BRICS countries together, as well as the economic advantages through investment. This common interest was highlighted in the recommendations of the Fifth BRICS Academic Forum, that 'BRICS should continue to collaborate to identify and utilise strategic opportunities to advance its objectives of reform of global multilateral institutions in order to make them more democratic, representative and accountable'.²

This recommendation will test the commitment of China and Russia in advancing the Security Council reform, as it has to be a foreign policy objective of both of these countries as members of BRICS. The transformation of the global governance institutions and organisations, particularly the UN Security Council, is high on the foreign-policy agenda of South Africa, making it an 'active agent of progressive change'.³ The consequence is that South Africa would be part of any organisation seeking to challenge and change the status quo of the global governance structures by consolidating 'strategic partnerships'⁴ with its BRICS partners and other progressive countries.

When addressing the Fifth BRICS Academic Forum, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South African Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, pointed out that in the formation of BRICS some critical issues were taken into consideration, when 'the dire need for providing additional impetus to global governance reform debates was recognised. The growing interdependence between nations of the world required joint efforts to address common challenges'.⁵ This is one of the key founding principles of BRICS, and this brief argues that any view that does not interpret BRICS in the context of this vision is unfounded and unrealistic; some scholars argue that BRICS is an organisational actor seeking to play the role of 'sub-imperialist' in the broad arena of international political economy, resolving common problems of the developing countries in the interests of the vast majority of their people.

South Africa in BRICS

The course of South Africa in the context of BRICS can only be understood through the foreign policy objectives of the state and how it pursues them. The inclusion of South Africa in BRICS is not only an achievement as a state, but also as a continental power in African affairs and as a player in international power relations. In elaborating this view, Sehlare Makgetlaneng, a Chief Research Specialist at AISA, asserts:

The position that Africa needs South African leadership continentally and globally is based, among others, on South Africa's position in a hierarchy of political, economic, financial, trade, human capital or human resources development, technological and military international power relations that extends from the United States of America at the centre of capitalism to the African continent at the periphery of capitalism. Its intermediate position in international power relations helps to explain its strategic role in African affairs and the fact that there is a higher level of demands and expectations from the rest of the continent and the world for it to play an increased role not only in continental affairs, but also between the continent and the rest of the world. It is expected to play a leading role in Africa's socio-political and economic transformation.⁶

This observation supports the view that South Africa will represent the African continent within this new global organisation politically, economically, financially, technologically and militarily. South Africa invited some leaders of African countries to attend the Fifth BRICS Summit as a demonstration that it is a representative of the African continent within BRICS. What South Africa and the African continent expect from BRICS was best articulated by Nkoana-Mashabane in her keynote address to the BRICS Academic Forum:

The world is experiencing a quiet and yet profound shift from the old locus of political, economic and social power into a multipolar system, with BRICS countries being the catalysts and drivers. In essence, the BRICS concept and its associated forums represent a counter to hegemonic unilateral creation of knowledge into a more pluralistic co-determination of knowledge production and policy agenda setting recognising multiple centres of human civilization.⁷

Africans expect a global power shift from the unipolar system that has come to characterise global power relations since 1989, with the end of Russia as a superpower and the growth of the US as the sole superpower. The shift is presaged by the rise of China, replacing Japan as the number two global economic power, and challenging the status of the US as the prime global economic power. Africa would also be in a favourable strategic position in global politics as a prominent actor, with its resources being used primarily for its own development and progress. This includes its interest in having at least two of its countries as permanent members of the UN Security Council, enjoying the same privileges afforded to its current permanent members.

Nkoana-Mashabane has articulated some of the key objectives of BRICS, criticising those who view BRICS as a grouping of countries aimed at overthrowing and replacing the current global power configuration of the West under the leadership of the US.

BRICS leaders and people have clearly signalled that we do not compete with any country or grouping and in fact wish to transform the former model of cooperation based on a zero-sum relationship in favour of more equitable and sustainable global partnerships, hence also the theme that was selected for the summit, namely BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation. This approach indeed constitutes a plurilateral, or in the older idiom, a multipolar structure of international relations.⁸

One of the implications of this statement is that Africa has forged new partnerships for its industrialisation and socio-economic development through South Africa's membership to BRICS. It is an endeavour to cut the umbilical cord that has subordinated the political economy of African countries to their former colonial masters and the US, which have used Africa as a springboard for their development and progress against its own interests and demands. This view was best expressed by Thabo Mbeki, former South African president, in his address to the 61st session of the UN General Assembly:

A global partnership for development is impossible in the absence of a pact of mutual responsibility between the giver and the recipient. It is impossible when the rich demand the right, unilaterally, to set the agenda and conditions for the implementation of commonly agreed

programmes. We who represent the poor know as a matter of fact that these billions of poor people are increasingly becoming impatient because every year they hear us adopt declaration after declaration, and yet nothing practical is done to assuage the hunger pains that keep them awake at night. Only few and selected agreements are implemented, with outcomes that are clearly insufficient to alleviate the excruciating pain of their children who cannot cry any more because to do so is to invite more pain.⁹

The impatience and frustration of Africans at the lack of commitment of the Western leaders to honour undertakings they made to African leaders has given way to Africans' new euphoria and hope of BRICS' contribution towards their continental development. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was an accord made between the developed countries and African leaders. However, leaders of developed countries have not honoured the commitments they made to African leaders. The epitome of the failure of developed countries to support Africa's development is the lingering doubt towards the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the targeted year 2015 draws near. Africa, as a major potential beneficiary of these goals, was hopeful that this initiative would fundamentally contribute to its rebirth and its movement from perennial conflicts and abject poverty to sustainable peace, security and prosperity. Now Africans look up to BRICS to support them in solving socio-economic problems such as poverty, and fast-tracking infrastructure development as a means to achieve socio-economic development. These expectations were best expressed in the recommendations of the Fifth BRICS Summit that:

A shared desire for peace, security, development, cooperation, respect for international law and sovereignty continues to serve as the fundamental principle for BRICS members in pursuit of a more equitable and fair world. These principles hold particularly in dealings with African countries, the sovereignty of many of which has not been respected in the past, especially by colonial powers.¹⁰

The value of Africa's relationship with BRICS is found on the basis of not only trade, infrastructure development, and pursuit of transformation of global governance structures, but also the fact that Africa wants to be a global actor and thus requires partnerships that will embrace and respect the African Union (AU) as an equal partner.

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Because South Africa, as a member of BRICS, plays a major role in the continental integration economically and politically, Africans view BRICS as a credible force to transform the structures of global governance in order to put the AU in the same league as the European Union (EU). The EU serves as an example of continental integration as regards to the free flow of information, common currency and free movement of the people and customs among its members. The architecture of the AU owed much to Thabo Mbeki, who played a leading role in the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the AU. He also worked with Olusegun Obasanjo, former Nigerian president; Abdelaziz Bouteflika, former Algerian president; and Abdoulaye Wade, former Senegalese president in the formation and adoption of NEPAD as the continental developmental programme.

Since the inception of the 1994 democratic rule, South Africa has ascended to centre stage and sought to transform its image from that of a pariah state to be the prominent and equal partner of other African countries in the transformation of the continent. Its membership of BRICS should be viewed as a continuation and pursuance of this endeavour that would ultimately nourish the fruits of development and progress of the continent.

India and China representing the East

It is also important to highlight the expectations and value of other members of BRICS. Though India and China are viewed as Asian representatives, they are in reality representing their interests within BRICS. They are the most populous countries in the world. With educated and innovative populations, they carry the burden of fulfilling the hopes of their citizens and those of the countries of the South. This is partly because of their shared history of being at the receiving end of colonialism and imperialism and of their achievement of development without much assistance from the West, with the exception of India. India has been receiving support from the US to counter the power of China, then the former Soviet Union and recently Russia. 'Beijing's campaign against India's (and Japan's) bids for United Nations (UN) Security Council permanent membership, and unresolved border disputes between Beijing and Delhi'¹¹ are issues that can be dealt with at the BRICS level precisely because it provides a platform for these countries to resolve

such issues emanating from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Brazil, India and South Africa aspire to be UN Security Council permanent members. This can only be done if China and Russia are sincerely and honestly faithful to the declared objectives of BRICS to ensure that all its members become Security Council permanent members, and then use the Security Council to transform the global governance structures. Failure to do this may stall the role BRICS should play in the development of the South.

Brazil representing Latin America

Brazil represents the region of Latin America. It carries the responsibility to be a leader of this region and represent it within BRICS. However, Brazil faces a challenge of consolidating its influence in this region, as Cuba carries more authority and influence as a regional powerhouse. Pallo Jordan asserts that:

Brazil, too, has a diverse population, numerically dominated by Afro-Brazilians, but otherwise dominated by whites. It lives in the shadow of the US, which, invoking the Monroe Doctrine, regards that country as part of its sphere of influence. Consequently, unlike tiny Cuba, Brazil has been unable to project its power in the region, let alone challenge the US on the world stage. Brazil's leftist government has redefined its role and seeks to build new transcontinental alliances with other developing countries. Until recently, Brazil's rapacious capitalist class plundered the rainforests and brutally exploited the indigenous peoples to near extinction. Perhaps, as in Russia, Brazil can realise its international goals by unlocking the talents of its African majority and indigenous minorities. That will require programmes to eliminate overt and covert forms of racial discrimination and to rein in the predatory practices of ranchers and logging and mining corporations that are doing such violence to the rainforests and the indigenous communities who live in them.¹²

The interests of Latin America are similar to those of Africa, especially as regards to the transformation of the global governance institutions, in particular the UN Security Council. Brazil's status, given Latin America's economic stature, means it could be a potential candidate to serve as a permanent member of the Security Council. 'There is

growing unhappiness in Brazil, which is a trade-deficit country, about China's perceived artificial devaluation of its currency to boost its export competitiveness'.¹⁵ This unhappiness and frustration could be resolved within the BRICS platform, thus closing any chance that the detractors of this progressive political formation could mobilise Brazil against China. Cooperation between these states is essential for the development of the countries of the South.

Russia representing Eastern Europe

Russia carries the responsibility of appealing economically and politically to Eastern Europe. The aspiration of Eastern Europe is to be on par with Western Europe in terms of its infrastructure development. Eastern Europe was under the leadership of Russia in the former Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western Europe has been a model of development for East European countries, characterised by the entry of these former Soviet Union countries into the EU. Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania are among the countries that have shifted their allegiance from Russia to the EU. Russia was a powerhouse of the former Soviet Union. It has supported the development of China in terms of both infrastructure and human resource development. It views BRICS as a means of regaining its former reputable standing in setting the agenda in global affairs. It finds BRICS relevant for its international relations and cooperation. Russia views BRICS rather as South Africa views it. The language used is different but the essence is the same. This is succinctly stated by Vladimir Shubin:

The emergence of BRICS, involving Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, means an application for the formation of an alternative centre of global influence in the arsenal of those countries – the majority of the world's population and an increasingly 'weighty' share of the world economy.¹⁴

The sharing of views of the role of BRICS by South Africa and Russia in the global political affairs underscores BRICS' weight in advancing its interests in the global political arena.

Conclusion

The argument of incoherence and different identities within BRICS, as potential obstacles

to the advancement of its interests in the global political arena, is to a certain extent limited and narrow. BRICS provides members with an opportunity to seek common ground on issues involving their foreign policies and national interests. The resolutions taken at the Fifth Summit of BRICS pave the way to its becoming a more coherent organisational actor with strategic planning to buttress its interests in global political and economic affairs. This is underscored by the resolution to establish a development bank and a think-tank which would enable it to assist the development of the countries of the South without dictating their agenda, proving it to be different from the developed countries.

The issues that would hold the BRICS members together were correctly identified and recommended at the summit as: BRICS and the global economy; reform of institutions of global governance; cooperation with Africa; education; research and skills development for building industrialising economies; and peace and security. These issues define the agenda and identities of BRICS members and thus provide a common approach in the international arena. However, given the double standards evinced by China and Russia in failing to advance the candidates of developing countries to represent them in the global governance institutions, the questions posed by Achin Vanaik¹⁵ are relevant, implying the need for foreign policy action from both China and Russia:

Can BRICS emerge as a collective that will reject the current neoliberal order and seek to promote a much more social welfarist form of capitalist development – one that might at least unleash a dynamic much more conducive to the emergence of more progressive social and political forces whose pressures are from below? And will it seriously challenge the existing world order where the imperialist behaviour of the US continues to be highly – and sometimes decisively – influential in shaping the course of events?

Recommendations:

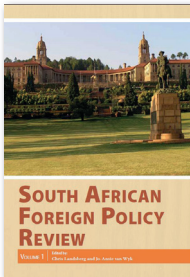
- The debate on the restructuring of the UN Security Council should be a priority in the agenda of the next BRICS summit in Brazil, to discuss how to approach the issue, reducing the potential divisions within BRICS. Commitment of members of BRICS to the implementation of its resolutions should be fast-tracked, monitored and evaluated.

The argument of incoherence and different identities within BRICS, as potential obstacles to the advancement of its interests in the global political arena, is to a certain extent limited and narrow

- The power and authority of BRICS should be consolidated at the regional and continental organisations of its members by always including its interests in the agenda and resolutions of those regional and continental organisations.
- India and China need to solve their border dispute by making use of BRICS when it is necessary or appropriate.
- BRICS should intensify the quest for representation of the developing countries in the World Bank, IMF and International Criminal Court (ICC) and should thereafter give them a mandate to favour the developing countries.

Notes and references

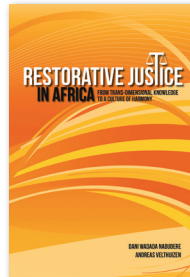
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Edited by Chris Landsberg and Jo-Ansie van Wyk

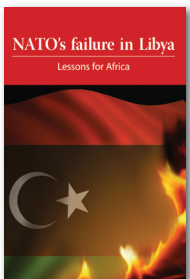
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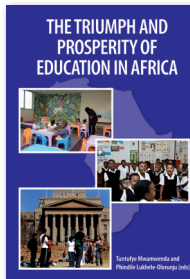
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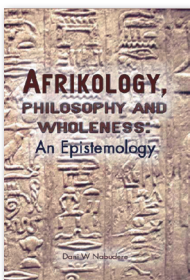
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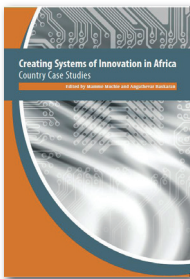
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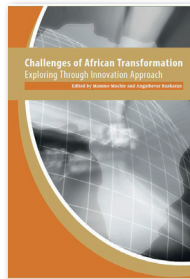
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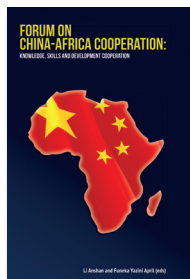


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ISSN 1998-7994

