

Research Brief

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BRICS cooperation and activities in the maritime domain

As part of a NIHSS-funded research project on 'Seeing the sea: Promoting BRICS maritime cooperation for sustainable development and security in Africa', the Ocean Regions Programme in the UP Department of Political Sciences recently conducted a scoping review of official BRICS documents in order to assess the extent to which an awareness of, interest in and activities on maritime issues manifest in documentation. Surprisingly, despite the fact that all five BRICS members are ocean states and that the past decade has seen the rise of prominence in ocean regions and maritime issues (the Arctic and Southern Ocean, the Indo-Pacific) rather little could be traced in the Group's activities. The Review provides the information available in the public domain, and we invite anyone with further information that could contribute to a more accurate summary, to send us the details in order to update the document.

The first mention of maritime issues/the ocean/s at Summit level comes in 2014 in the Fortaleza Declaration when Brazil chaired the Group: piracy and armed robbery at sea is mentioned as an area of concern and would remain so in declarations going forward. The 2017 BRICS Declaration, under China as chair, mentions 'ocean cooperation' as an area to be further explored. The declaration/report of the 2020 annual meeting of the BRICS Business Council stresses the 'vital importance to continue joint discussion and adoption of the Blue Economy Declaration' by BRICS countries, emphasising that the strategy was crucial

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to the achievement of the BRICS Economic Partnership Strategy 2025.

Yet there is hardly any evidence that the Group has remained seized with ocean or maritime matters, apart from the commitment to combat terrorism, piracy and 'blue' crime. In fact, an early very practical and concrete proposal, accepted with great enthusiasm and referred to often for a few years, involved the announcement of the construction of a 32 000km long undersea optic-fibre cable in 2012, aimed at connecting the BRICS countries and countries on the West and East coasts of Africa. This idea, though announced at a BRICS Business Forum meeting in India in 2012, seemed later to have been abandoned, somewhat reminiscent of many BRICS announcements which turns out to be declamatory, rather than an indication of firm resolve.



So, why this lack of apparent interest in collaboration or follow-through on matters oceanic? We offer three explanations and invite our readers' inputs.

A first explanation is to be found in the fact that BRICS is not institutionalised in the sense of having a secretariat, detailed operational plans or mechanisms for feedback and reporting. Its myriad of 'spin-off' organisations and institutions submit annual reports to the Summit and these are regularly noted in Summit declarations, but there is no centralisation - BRICS remains a forum for discussion and, to some extent, coordination, much like the G7 and G20. Linked to this is the fact that whichever member chairs the group in a particular year, decides on the agenda for that period (though of course discussed with other members), resulting in each year's agenda largely reflecting the specific concerns of the chairing member at that particular point in time, though of course in the broad context of the rationale for having the group in the first place.

Some issues are constant - the commitment to multilateralism, the UN, international law, the restructuring of international institutions, economic development, anti-terrorism etc. - but these are broad commitments, largely

at the inspirational level. Seldom, at least at Summit level, is a specific issue identified to be carried forward into a new chairing period.

This leads to a second explanation: BRICS, at least at the present moment in time, is not yet bigger than the sum total of its members: it remains a gathering of somewhat like-minded states interested in interaction and dialogue with a view to share ideas, knowledge and information that would assist in each member's domestic pursuit of, in particular, economic development. It also provides an opportunity, again as a kind of rationale, or as a backdrop, to collaboration, usually at a bilateral or trilateral level, in specific issue areas, becoming, as it were, a kind of justification for such cooperation - the 'BRICS family'-idea comes into play here. Being in the BRICS group promotes collaboration, but not necessarily under the BRICS 'banner'. So, for instance, the February 2023 joint naval exercise (Mosi II) in which South Africa (host), China and Russia participated, was not a BRICS activity. In a sense BRICS gets 'credit' for certain actions, activities and ideas simply because (some of) its members choose to collaborate in joint ventures: members may collaborate because of their membership of the group, and not necessarily because the activity is BRICS-sanctioned.



At a political level, a third explanation for the lack of BRICS cooperation in the maritime domain, lies in the divergent objectives and political aspirations of its bigger members, viz. India, China and Russia. These countries do not necessarily agree on the 'how' and 'what' of maritime cooperation (apart from combating terrorism, piracy and blue crime), especially given geopolitical trends and conflicting interests. Genuine maritime cooperation, whether in terms of maritime security or developing a BRICS blue economy, holds serious implications for the individual orientations and objectives of these countries, given the tensions among them, especially when it comes to the evolution of new maritime regions, such as the Indo-Pacific.

For India, the Indian Ocean remains 'India's ocean' and it is uncomfortable with and suspicious of Chinese incursions into what it considers to be its traditional space and area of influence. India has never approved, nor joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which includes a maritime component. But membership of an organisation or a group/forum does not mean that countries agree on (all) matters: in fact, one of the strengths of BRICS, and a reason for its endurance despite serious tensions

amongst some members, lies in the group's ability to exclude potential sensitive issues and issue areas from discussions and to avoid putting these on the agenda.

The lack of attention to such an obvious issue as maritime collaboration in its broadest sense, could therefore (also) be a result of the fact that the members recognise the deep divisions and therefore the maritime domain in security and economic development terms does not form part of the focus and agenda of the group.

Addressing the BRICS Youth Summit on the sidelines of the 2018 Johannesburg BRICS summit, Minister Dlamini-Zuma referred to the fact that 'all our nations [BRICS member states] are surrounded by oceans and seas and all have fertile waterways and rivers, however very little has been said about this advantage'. Given the above explanations this silence may not be that surprising after all. BRICS is not an actor in its own right - it is what its members makes of it in the context of pursuing their own interests, and 'the maritime' might simply, at this point in time, not be a mutual interest beyond cooperating - with several other international actors - in addressing terrorist threats and transnational crime. •