



Research Brief

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Post BRICS Roundtable

¹On the 28th of August 2023, the Ocean Regions Programme at the University of Pretoria hosted a roundtable discussion to reflect on the recent BRICS Summit hosted by South Africa in Johannesburg. In attendance was Sanusha Naidu, who shared valuable insights gained from attending the Summit in person, as well as academics, diplomats, practitioners and students. Ms Naidu made five broad observations before the general discussion started:

Firstly, she noted the initial [overshadowing of the event](#) by the arrest warrant that had been issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, much to the surprise, and perhaps relief, of the South African government, for the duration of the summit the issue was hardly mentioned, both in the actual dialogue and meetings, and in the media. In fact, it was almost as though the entire issue that had captivated much of the narrative in the lead-up to the summit simply evaporated.

Secondly, another obstacle that initially loomed in the background was the issue of expansion. In the months leading up to the Summit, while there was a general consensus that expansion was the goal, there was very little agreement as to how this would occur. Questions such as the timeline for expansion and the criteria for membership garnered little consensus. As such, South Africa had to do a lot of groundwork in the lead-up to the event on forging consensus. Some states, such as India and Brazil, were very cautious about expansion, and rather than necessarily providing a list of the definite members for expansion, were more focused on articulating what the guidelines and criteria for expansion would be. It was in fact only at the very last Sherpa meeting in Durban that consensus was reached amongst the members. On this note, an important question needs to be raised, namely what the

¹ This research brief was compiled by Daniela Marggraff and edited by Professor Maxi Schoeman within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. Contributions were also made by Tshegofatso Ramachela. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

difference is between states that “were invited to join BRICS”, as opposed to states who “put up their hands” and expressed interest in joining BRICS.

The issue of expansion largely overshadowed the entire summit, to the extent that other important issues that warranted attention did not receive much attention. For example, the Just Energy Transition got lost in the bigger dynamics, as did other issues such as the ocean economy and the digital economy. In fact, it seemed as though much of the original agenda was peripheral while expansion was central. By late Wednesday 23rd August, Minister Pandor confirmed that agreement had been reached on guidelines and principles for the admission of new members, as well as on which new members would be admitted. Although these guidelines and principles were not released in the public domain, the new members (as of January 2024) were announced on Thursday the 24th.

Thirdly, the issue of a BRICS currency also received considerable media attention, especially in the foreign and Western media, although it was largely misrepresented. The idea was mainly to discuss the issue of international payment systems and facilitating local payment systems between BRICS states. At the BRICS business summit, the issue was discussed, but no consensus was reached on the idea of a common currency.

Fourthly, what was noticeable was the [speech](#) delivered by the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, and Ms Naidu quoted:

As the global community moves towards multipolarity, we desperately need – and I have been vigorously advocating for – a strengthened and reformed multilateral architecture based on the UN Charter and international law. Today’s global governance structures reflect yesterday’s world [...] And so I have come to Johannesburg with a simple message: in a fracturing world with overwhelming crises, there is simply no alternative to cooperation. We must urgently restore trust and reinvigorate multilateralism for the 21st century.

This is arguably one of the most explicit claims made by the Secretary-General and reflects the need for reform (see also

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below). On the note of reform, it was highlighted in the discussion, that in calling for reform, BRICS is not automatically anti-West. The BRICS summit was not a counter to the Western world order but was rather established to deal with the current restrictive nature of the prevailing global order. [Brazilian President Lula emphasized](#) this in his statement explaining that BRICS does not want to be a counterpoint to the G7, G20, or the United States. Lastly, Ms Naidu reflected on the general consensus in the media – locally and internationally – that South Africa’s hosting of the Summit was a huge success, both in terms of form and substance. However, she emphasized the fact that there was not much clarity on South Africa’s ‘own’ BRICS strategy in relation to its foreign policy and national interest.

During the general discussion, talk turned yet again to the issue of expansion and implications for South Africa, especially since it will now no longer be the sole voice of Africa with the addition of Ethiopia and Egypt. Some participants were of the view that the only reason that Ethiopia was invited to join BRICS, as opposed to, for instance, Nigeria, was because it would be less of a threat to South Africa than Nigeria. Another participant noted that the expanded BRICS signifies a diminishing role for South Africa. In fact, perhaps South Africa is now reduced to being the voice of Southern Africa. While it could be argued that South Africa has had its heyday in BRICS, this need not be seen as a negative. Rather, it affords South Africa the opportunity to be relieved of the pressure that comes with being the spokesperson for the entire continent, and to rather focus on its own interest. Furthermore, South Africa could potentially now play a more influential role in issues such as the Ethiopia-Egypt Nile dispute.

One of the most prominent themes arising at the discussion was the role that India played at and during the Summit. This is in contrast to what many may have expected, namely a strong and bold Russia and China. Modi’s reported unhappiness about not being received in person by President Ramaphosa upon arrival at Waterkloof Air Base received much attention and speculation in the media – this could be interpreted as Modi’s signalling that India is no longer satisfied as acting in the shadow of Russia and China, but rather is clear in articulating that it wants to be the voice of the Global South. As opposed to [China’s](#) speech which was focused on critiquing the current world order, the speech by [India](#) was inherently “India-centric”, emphasizing the role that India seeks to play. As such, it may not be unreasonable to suggest that in future, the world will not be defined by a world order that is dominated either by the US or China, but that other actors, such

as India, will be highly influential; in other words, we are moving to a multipolar, rather than to a 'new' bipolar order.

The consensus at the roundtable discussion was that the Summit was largely a major success for South Africa. Politically and symbolically it was successful in that it seemed to reflect a substantial degree of consensus on issues that were initially creating divisions between members, facilitated by the statesmanship of Ramaphosa as host of the event. At the end of the Summit, the [Johannesburg II Declaration](#) was released, even though there were initial fears by members of the media the evening before, that perhaps there would be no declaration. Furthermore, the BRICS reached consensus on which member states to invite, namely the Argentine Republic, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Of crucial importance is [Point 7 of the declaration](#):

We support a comprehensive reform of the UN, including its Security Council, with a view to making it more democratic, representative, effective and efficient, and to increase the representation of developing countries in the Council's memberships so that it can adequately respond to prevailing global challenges and support the legitimate aspirations of emerging and developing countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America, including Brazil, India and South Africa, to play a greater role in international affairs, in particular in the United Nations, including its Security Council.

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This is the first time that a summit declaration refers directly to the need for broader permanent membership in the Security Council – in the past, the emphasis was on the reform of global financial institutions with China and Russia probably reluctant to open the door or commit to an expansion of the P5.

In concluding the discussion, participants agreed that it is equally important that the Summit be followed by intensive reflections on what an expanded BRICS means and the challenges that may flow from expansion, particularly for South Africa. Important questions remain:

- How will South Africa react if Morocco were to be considered for membership?
- What exactly is South Africa's BRICS strategy?

- How will the consensus decision-making model be applied in the expanded BRICS?
- What kind of a future does BRICS represent?
- If the original members of the BRICS were to have a larger influence than the new members, does this not reflect a sense of double standards in the rhetoric of BRICS states who seemingly advocate for a more just and equitable global order?
- Have the BRICS transitioned from a mostly economic bloc to a political bloc?
- How does one get states to actually embody the values and principles they speak of?
- Considering that the [original five BRICS](#) member states have a share of 55 per cent in the New Development Bank (NDB), will this perhaps over time also lead to calls for a restructuring that would be more 'equitable'?
- Do the BRICS (especially in its expanded form), beyond their shared worldview that expresses discontent with the current world system, have enough common ground to hold them together?