



BRICS EXPANSION

Report on a Roundtable Discussion

17 Feb 2023



BRICS EXPANSION – A report on a roundtable discussion hosted under the auspices of the Ocean Regions Project in the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria on 17 February 2022¹

Introduction

This roundtable discussion forms part of a NIHSS-BRICS Think Tank-funded research project that, amongst others, aims to bring together practitioners and researchers, including senior students, to discuss issues pertinent to South Africa's chairing of BRICS in 2023.

One of the important issues on the 2023 BRICS Summit agenda is that of BRICS enlargement. The 2022 Summit Declaration (the Summit was chaired by China), concluded, in article 73 of its fourteenth Summit Declaration:

We support promoting discussions among BRICS members on BRICS expansion process. We stress the need to clarify the guiding principles, standards, criteria and procedures for this expansion process through Sherpas' channel on the basis of full consultation and consensus.

This matter was therefore discussed at a closed roundtable² meeting at the University of Pretoria on 17 February 2023. The meeting was attended by the South African BRICS sherpa, Amb. Anil Sooklal and several of his colleagues, as well as a number of academics, researchers from Gauteng-based think tanks and postgraduate students. The purpose of the discussion was to consider the implications of expansion as well as the process as it is currently progressing through the Sherpas' channel. The meeting was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, and therefore, in this report, no comments or remarks are attributed to speakers. It merely serves to summarise the most salient points and issues raised during the discussion.

An overview of past expansion

BRICS expansion is an issue that speaks to both process and politics, and has its genesis in the inclusion of South Africa during a 'first round of enlargement' in 2010. This could be seen as a formal expansion, as South Africa became a full member of the (albeit informal) grouping.

A further phase of expansion, best characterised perhaps by the phrase 'intermediate phase' was that of BRICS Outreach, initiated by South Africa during its chairing of the summit in 2013 when it invited a number of African countries to attend the Summit. The Outreach, in a further development under the chairing of China in 2017, was enhanced by the adoption of a BRICS+ initiative, which initiated the annual invitation to BRICS summits of emerging and developing economies to expand cooperation and collaboration amongst global South countries under the aegis of BRICS. BRICS+ also opened an opportunity for the summit host to invite non-government organisations from business and civil society to attend the Summit and its wide range of fringe activities. Both initiatives – BRICS Outreach and BRICS+ - can be viewed as intermediate or informal expansion as none of those invited have become full members of BRICS. It should also be noted that during the run-up to its chairing of BRICS in 2018, South Africa in late 2017 tabled a discussion point on expansion. However, it was decided at the Summit that the time was not yet ripe for a formal expansion and that emphasis should-rather be placed on encouraging and fostering closer intra-BRICS cooperation.

The 2022 Summit, hosted by China, saw a clear move towards a second phase of formal expansion. Several countries had either formally applied for, or had enquired about full membership. China in particular, as well as Russia, seemed rather keen on the idea of expansion, with South Africa in full support. India initially, seemed less keen on formal expansion, but has since become fully involved in the follow-up meetings to discuss the topic through the sherpa's channel. Brazil (post the mid-2022 summit) indicated that it would

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² This report was compiled by Dr Robin Blake and Prof Maxi Schoeman

not be in a position to discuss expansion as it was entering a presidential election, but since late 2022 the country has participated in discussions concerning expansion. In summary, their positions are as follows:

- Brazil was initially non-committal because of the impending national elections and only made recommendations on institutional arrangements.
- Russia is in favour of expansion.
- India was initially cautious but has warmed to expansion.
- China advocates for incremental expansion. This involves the inclusion of partner countries before according full membership.
- South Africa is in favour and is particularly focused on giving expansion an African voice.

In short, there is a clear move from intermediate, informal expansion through invitations to annual summits, to a more resolute commitment to formal expansion.

Charting a way forward

As chair of BRICS in 2023, South Africa is to lead discussions around expansion and it intends tabling recommendations at the upcoming summit to be held in August of this year.

However, two primary considerations require balancing: On the one hand, South Africa's position on expansion, and, on the other hand, managing the issue in line with the 2022 Summit declaration calling for clear guiding principles, standards, criteria and procedures. The latter will doubtless prove challenging as the positions of two member countries – Russia seemingly very keen on expansion and China favouring an incremental approach – will have to be accommodated. What is clear, though, is that, much along the lines of the structure and ownership format of the New Development Bank, the current member countries, making up the BRICS acronym, will remain *primus inter pares*. This is why setting out the modalities of expansion and the 'accession process' is of great importance.

Several aspects related to the process, but also the underlying politics of BRICS expansion, were discussed by the roundtable participants – it is clear that it is not simply a case of 'procedure', but that politics plays into the expansion 'conversation' every step of the way. In what follows, the most salient issues addressed during the discussion, are briefly summarised.

Firstly, the question of 'why expand', generated much discussion. On the meaning or concept of expansion: Expansion can be both material and ideational. Material expansion can be rigid and/or elastic and it involves the institutional arrangements, structures, dialogue and outreach mechanisms and criteria for membership. Ideational expansion involves agreeing and promoting a vision, ideas, beliefs, values, and culture that underpin BRICS. These aspects are crucial to the eventual decision on how expansion will be conceived of and managed.

Secondly, there is keen interest in BRICS expansion, evidenced, on the one hand, by the number of countries from the global South that have already applied for membership, as well as those who have enquired about applying (in total 13 or 14 countries), with, at this stage, fair certainty that Egypt and Argentina will be amongst the first to be admitted. There is particularly strong interest on the part of the MENA/T region, including Morocco. Apart from the North African countries (those in the MENA region), there seems to be little interest on the part of African countries. On the other hand, there is also much interest from the global North, particularly the EU, in the expansion process – in what it will entail and how it will proceed. It was pointed out that there is a 'new energy' in BRICS and that it is increasingly seen as a new global bloc at the centre of growing international polarisation. Moreover, BRICS has over time developed a range of commonalities, principles and procedures that are underpinned by a BRICS 'way of thinking' or 'ethos'. This should be borne in mind when crafting membership procedures that include standards and criteria.

Thirdly, in deciding on new members, it would be important to also explore the expansion practices of other international organisations. IORA was mentioned specifically, with the example of France having originally been a dialogue partner before becoming a full member of the organisation. It might be useful to examine other examples of organisational expansion. There are different layers or strata of involvement in, and interaction with such groupings. One possible consideration, based on the idea of incrementalism, could be to build, through the design of standards and criteria, different types of membership. This will open the way for aspiring members to move through/ascend through the different levels of association and incorporation before becoming full members. The way in which the New Development Bank (NDB) allows new members to join the bank can also be considered: for example use NDB membership as a criterion for BRICS membership. This would mean that the UAE and Bangladesh would comply, soon to be followed by Egypt and Uruguay. Whether NDB membership should be a criterion/one of the criteria, is yet to be debated, as it would exclude several sub-Saharan African countries. The example of Botswana was mentioned – South Africa had hoped that Botswana would join the NDB, but financially Botswana could not afford the capital lay-out and it is doubted whether one of the continent's giants, viz. Nigeria, would be able to afford membership of the NDB. Also, Argentina, already high-up on the list of first round of expansion, is not a member of the NDB.

Fourthly, another way of expansion, would be to follow-a more formalised version of the BRICS Outreach and BRICS+ approaches, with the current members 'deciding' who should be included. This option was, however, not discussed in any detail.

Fifthly, the question was also raised whether membership expansion should be focused on individual states or on regional organisations, with the latter representing regional 'nodes'. Here, for instance, one could think of regional organisations such as ASEAN or the AU, or sub-regional organisations, such as the African regional economic communities. Again, this question was not discussed in any detail, but there seemed to be agreement that provision could be made for regional organisation membership in some form – the idea of dialogue partners was mentioned specifically.

The participants did not, however, confine their discussion of expansion to whether and how to manage membership expansion. An issue that generated attention was that of intra-BRICS expansion in the sense that the informal grouping has become institutionalised, with at least 130 meetings per year, on average. In particular, the activities of its constituent components seem to be growing rapidly. This growth/expansion, and the numerous diplomatic tracks that have evolved since the inception of BRICS, begs the question of formalisation: has it become time for BRICS to establish a secretariat, at the very least, in order to, as one participant put it, 'catch up with institutionalisation'?

A final point concerned South Africa's African advocacy role for expanding BRICS membership. The country has made it clear, especially so since its BRICS Outreach initiative started in 2013, and in line with its stated foreign policy ideals and objectives, that it considers the development of the continent as a centre-piece of its BRICS membership. In this respect there are four factors that will impact South Africa's advocacy role. The first factor concerns the African states identified/targeted by South Africa for potential BRICS membership (it appears that Botswana and Nigeria are top of the list but this does not exclude other contenders). The second factor is the impact that greater African representation on BRICS might have on South Africa and whether it might 'dilute' South Africa's influence. Furthermore, South Africa might be perceived as a 'gatekeeper' when it comes to who from the continent, and especially Sub-Saharan Africa is 'in' and who is 'out'. The third factor is that the inclusion of African states into BRICS enhances the expectation that South Africa is the continent's champion. The fourth factor is that South Africa should be clear on how BRICS membership – its own and a potentially expanded BRICS – serves the national interest. Therefore, South Africa's advocacy role will be dictated by a balance between continental and domestic imperatives.

In conclusion, the following aspects were raised, but not discussed in detail. In addition to South Africa driving expansion as an agenda item at the Summit in tandem with developing its own position on BRICS expansion, the following additional aspects deserve attention:

- Countering the G7/Global North narrative and the perception of BRICS as 'competition'.
- Identifying the stakeholders who would benefit from BRICS expansion and how they should be lobbied and involved.
- Promoting expansion as an inclusive concept; it is not about Russia and China and their preferences. India and Brazil are equally important.

It was agreed that all of the above merit judicious consideration and planning.