



Summary

The Future of Geopolitical Cooperation - South Africa and the Results of the 15th BRICS Summit

11 September 2023, 11:00 - 12:30hrs
Virtual via Zoom

Background

The 15th BRICS Summit was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 22 to 24 August. It was the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia - Ukraine war that the Summit took place in person. The current geopolitical situation as well as discussions about an expansion of the BRICS group and the replacement of the US dollar as the global currency had already drawn international interest in the run-up to the summit. Accordingly, the decision of the BRICS to expand the group by six countries attracted attention worldwide: With Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates set to join the alliance in January 2024, the so-called "BRICS Plus" countries will generate 37% of global economic output and account for 46% of the world's population. The geopolitical influence of the bloc is growing accordingly. Further expansions could also occur in the future, as announced by South Africa's President and current chairman of the BRICS group, Cyril Ramaphosa. Against this backdrop, the German Africa Foundation and the *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation* organised an online discussion.

Highlights

- The BRICS group is not an alliance against the organisations of the West; rather, the focus of the BRICS is on strategic partnership and the deepening of cooperation in the Global South.
- BRICS must therefore be understood as an alliance of convenience, not an ideological alliance - a common interest that unites the BRICS states is the desire to reform the international economic and financial order, in which the states of the Global South are represented on an equal footing.
- In Europe, BRICS and especially the expansion by six states is perceived as a threat to the international order and as an anti-West alliance.

Welcome Remarks

Sabine Odhiambo,
Secretary General,
German Africa Foundation

Discussion

Gustavo de Carvalho,
Senior Researcher on Russia-
Africa Relations, SAIIA

Prof Cedric de Coning,
Senior Advisor, ACCORD

**Prof Dr Christian von
Soest,**
Head of Research
Programme "Peace and
Security", GIGA

**H.E. Prof Dr Anil
Sooklal,**
South African Ambassador at
Large for Asia and BRICS and
South Africa's BRICS Sherpa

**Prof Siphamandla
Zondi,**
Department of Politics and
International Relations,
University of Johannesburg

Moderation

Prof Cheryl Hendricks,
Executive Director, Institute
for Justice and
Reconciliation, IJR



The 15th BRICS Summit - Programme and results

The thematic focus of this year's BRICS Summit laid on deepening the partnership between the BRICS countries and the African continent - a topic that South Africa has traditionally pursued in its role as host. Also on the agenda were the topics of growth (2) and the role BRICS could play in promoting growth both among themselves and at a global level, sustainability (3) and the reform of the multilateral system towards a fairer international order (4). The summit itself was divided into three parts: The first day, which included the Business Forum that was attended by around 1,000 delegates from the BRICS countries as well as other countries from the African continent and Global South, was dedicated to the private sector. The *Women's Business Alliance* (WBA), which was founded in 2020, also held its first face-to-face meeting. In total, trade agreements amounting ZAR 50 billion (approx. EUR 2.4 billion) were signed during the summit, reported South Africa's BRICS Sherpa H.E. Prof Dr Anil Sooklal. The second part was the meeting of the BRICS heads of state and government, in which Russian President Vladimir Putin participated virtually. In addition to deepening the partnership between the BRICS states and Africa, the focus of the final day was primarily on the announcement of the expansion of the group of states: As the head of states agreed the previous day, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are to join the group in January 2024, thus forming the „BRICS Plus“. Ambassador Sooklal reported that the regulations for the admission of potential new members were mainly worked out at sherpa level. In addition to the expansion of the BRICS, including admission conditions, the question of a possible common BRICS currency was also at the centre of media debates in the run-up to the summit. However, it was not possible to reach an agreement here. Instead, it was agreed to increasingly trade with each other in local currencies instead of US dollars - the implementation of this is to be worked out by the finance ministers and the heads of the central banks of the member states, as stated in the final declaration (*Johannesburg Declaration 2*), and presented at the next BRICS summit in Russia.

From South Africa's perspective, the BRICS summit was very successful, emphasised H.E. Prof Dr Sooklal, whose assessment was shared by the other panellists. Not only had South Africa succeeded in bringing together numerous countries of the Global South and articulating and addressing global challenges in an inclusive manner, South Africa had also shown that it was working together with all entities for a genuine reform of the global architecture. South Africa has also demonstrated not only that it can be a bridge between Africa and the Global North, but also a representative voice for Africa or even the Global South, said Prof Dr Christian von Soest.

However, Ambassador Sooklal and Gustavo de Carvalho emphasised that the results of the BRICS summit should also be seen in the context of global developments such as the G20 summit in India and its final document: both summits had placed a stronger focus on countries of the Global South and their contribution to solving global challenges.

BRICS as a strategic partnership

Although the BRICS member states pursue the same interests in some areas - such as the demand for a fairer global system - the BRICS is not an alliance: the interests, values and partners of the individual members vary greatly; while Brazil, India and South Africa, for example, regard the EU and USA as important and close partners, the relationship between China and Russia and the EU and USA is tense. The political systems within the group of states also differ greatly, a fact, that is, however, recognised and accepted by all members, the panel agreed. Prof. Dr von Soest also emphasised the concept of so-called "alliances of convenience", a change in international alliances in which a convergence of political systems is no longer a necessity for cooperation.



An important factor in the cooperation of the countries of the Global South is the frustration about their role in the international order. The states are not treated as equals, which pushes them to the margins of the international order. The grouping of the BRICS states emerged out of this frustration with the aim of jointly demanding an equal position in international organisations. According to Prof Zondi, many countries of the Global South have the advantage of being able to formulate concrete ideas due to their smaller economic size. At the same time, however, this also prevents them from successfully implementing these ideas. This is where co-operation in groupings such as the BRICS comes into play, which can help to make ideas and demands heard.

The BRICS expansion

The selection of the new BRICS Plus members came as a surprise to many, as they would bring new lines of conflict into the group, reported Gustavo de Carvalho, among others. For example, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are extremely tense. Likewise, there are also repeated tensions between the regional rivals Ethiopia and Egypt, where the GERD mega dam project, among other things, recently led to an escalation. Argentina is not a particularly reliable candidate either - the country is in a turbulent domestic political phase shortly before the national elections and a possible change of power, and relations with Iran have recently been almost completely frozen. However, if you take a closer look at the new members, the selection does not seem so random, de Carvalho argued. Not only is Ethiopia the most influential country in the Horn of Africa, its large population and rapidly growing economy also make it an attractive partner - despite its domestic political problems. In addition, the landlocked country could play an increasingly important role in global trade due to its good relations with neighbouring Eritrea and Djibouti, which both provide access to ports. As far as the inclusion of the oil-producing states is concerned, the liquidity aspect was most likely convincing. The plans to increasingly settle trade between the BRICS states in national currencies may also have played an important role here, as China and India are among the largest buyers of oil from the Middle East. On the other hand, de Carvalho saw the inclusion of Argentina as a kind of compromise for Brazil, which had previously long opposed the idea of an expansion of BRICS. As far as the conflicts between the new members were concerned, he saw their inclusion in BRICS as an opportunity - BRICS could play an important mediating role among its member states.

Inclusive multilateralism in the global order

According to Prof Zondi, current geopolitics is characterised by conflicts and competition with one another. The comparison of current rivalries with the Cold War also came up in the discussion. Some of the current circumstances in global competition resonate with the Cold War period. However, Gustavo de Carvalho emphasised that the conflicts were no longer between two states, but between different regions. Current international relations are therefore much more complex than they were during the Cold War, which means that comparisons and current rhetoric fall short of the mark. Accordingly, a shift in the global order towards the Global South and thus towards a multipolar order is an unstoppable economic fact, added Prof Coning. The expansion of the BRICS is, among other things, an expression of these changes. However, this does not serve to create an entity that is opposed to other organisations and systems; rather, the BRICS Group is committed to inclusive multilateralism that respects the UN Charter and international law, emphasised Ambassador Sooklal. The overarching goal is to make relations between the Global South and the Global North fairer, which is why the regions must be given an equal



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voice at the United Nations.

The European perspective

In Europe, BRICS and especially the expansion of the group is perceived as a threat to the liberal global order, according to Prof de Coning. The Global North sees the BRICS states as a "club of autocracies", although this does not correspond to reality due to the diversity of political and value systems within the BRICS group. Constructing narratives that portray BRICS as a counter-organisation to other Western alliances of states will only complicate the process of achieving a global order based on equality and further fuel competition and Cold War rhetoric, he argued. Instead, the states of the Global North should support change, enter into dialogue with BRICS and then BIRCS-Plus and focus on partnership and cooperation.