

Comment & Analysis

Use Brics to help build a better country

South Africa should capitalise on the bloc's resources, including advanced technology and innovation

GEOPOLITICS
Klaus Kotzé

For a platform that represents almost half of the world's population and about a quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (Brics) receives scant attention and is poorly perceived.

Brics is not only of significance to a global order undergoing unprecedented strain, it remains an under-used opportunity for South Africa to maximise its policy and strategy. The obscurity under which Brics remains is central to South Africa's failure to appreciate the advantages it holds.

After a decade, Brics continues to be represented as something it is not. Brics is not an economic bloc of fast-growing developing countries. If this were the case then other states such as Indonesia would be included at South Africa's expense. Also, if Brics was about economic growth, its association would not have flourished as it has. It would have fizzled along with its members' economic promises.

Instead of remaining an investment slogan conjured by Goldman Sachs in 2001, Brics countries opportunistically adopted the recognition of their combined ascent to claim subjectivity in the global power discourse. It transcended Goldman Sachs by inviting South Africa, creating Brics as a globally representative extra-Western strategic and geopolitical regime.

Brics informally networks with divergent states with similar perspectives on global governance as nodes in state-centric intergovernmentalism. Its state-driven multilateralism does not pool agency into additional institutions outside the ambit of the state. Instead, it empowers its members as the central authorities of international relations, allowing for mutual interests to be pursued and expressed.

Brics, which held its 11th summit in Brasilia on November 13 and 14, seeks to evolve, not to replace, the international order. It presents an avenue towards 21st-century global power and governance. Brics's purpose is to demonstrate multilateral solutions, to transcend the ongoing geopolitical interregnum, a situation where subjectivity and influence is over-concentrated in the West at the expense of developing states.

Every summit declaration, Brics's central policy tool, advances a core mantra: comprehensive reform of global governance institutions to ensure effective multilateralism and greater representation for developing countries.

According to South Africa's Brics ambassador, Anil Sooklal, "Brics as a grouping is not in competition with any other global formation. One of the major principles of the Brics grouping is to reinforce the centrality of multilateralism and the importance of the United Nations system."

To achieve its ends Brics requires recognition and influence. It advances its vision through building a persuasive paradigm of global reform, rhetorically motivating



Future power: The \$180-million loan that Eskom has secured from Brics' New Development Bank to expand its renewable energy efforts – such as the Sere Wind farm, about 350km from Cape Town – is an example of how the bloc can help boost South Africa's growth. Photo: Rodger Bosch/AFP

and designing the order it aspires towards. Brics uses communications as a technology of power. It has developed its narrative through a broad scope of engagements on multiple levels, including official, civic, academic and business.

Throughout its communications Brics subsumes itself under the authority of the United Nations, performing the norms and principles advanced in the UN Charter. Its structure is founded in the sovereign independence and equality of all members (article 2.1); its engagement takes place openly, in good faith (article 2.2); members deliberately share and co-operate, thereby opposing threat and force (article 2.4).

Brics's influence resides in this embodiment of legitimate international relations.

Brics's engagements are based on sharing, co-operation and sovereign equality. The result is a multilateral system that allows equal but differentiated input towards mutual interests. Brics's rejection of closed alliances is especially persuasive today as unilateral supremacy in Western blocs forestall consensus. This was exhibited at this year's G7 Summit, where the practice of releasing a yearly declaration was summarily abandoned.

Conversely, Brics's collaborative pursuit is increasingly seen as a compelling design for co-operation. It is also proving effective. According to a 2019 University of Toronto study, Brics has complied with 75% of its commitments across all its summits.

Brics's strategic approach is to complement. This is exemplified by the bloc's flagship institution. According to the New Development Bank's treaty, it is purposed to "mobilise resources ... complementing the existing efforts of multilateral and regional financial institutions

for global growth and development". Furthermore, the bank strategically concentrates on infrastructure and sustainable development, focuses that are often neglected by other banks but are critical to developing states.

South Africa is not fully exploiting its membership for the potential gains it offers. Brics could be a catalyst for the country's local and international strategies.

Brics's networked approach has expanded beyond the original top-level, technical engagements to increasingly focus on public diplomacy and public engagement. Its foundational principles of equality, sharing and co-operation allow members to collectively give shape to a new multilateralism. Within Brics, members of varying sizes hold nominally equal privilege.

Although this co-ordination allows states such as China to persuasively deny that it dominates, it also affords South Africa enormous potential to capitalise from the bloc's collective resources.

Since joining Brics, South Africa has seen a steady increase in its trade with and investment from Brics states. While the numbers are encouraging, Brics is not a trading bloc. Indeed, most members have a clear trade imbalance under China's dominance. To the limited eye of trade and finance, Brics makes little sense. Instead, it is its strategic partnership that presents a new modality that transcends market performance, to concentrate on

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the sharing of knowledge and the learned experience.

The foundation of pursuing mutual interests through open exchange among diverse states promises to unlock countless, diverse opportunities, to promote skills development, capacity building, knowledge transfer and cross-fertilisation of ideas. These are the assets of the information economy. Through centralising these features, the Brics network allows for unrestricted gain through access. In the information economy, resources are intangible and non-exhaustive. Interest is accrued from working together and benefits are not determined in a winner-takes-all scenario. Instead, profits are multiplied when shared.

Brics is underpinned by co-operation and exchange. It is in sharing experiences and practices that its members construct their expanded knowledge economies. Its willingness to exchange is not a selfless act but instead promises a four-fold return, benefiting from the experiences of others. Openness and co-operation at the state-to-state level lay the groundwork for a networked order that does not require the replication of existing institutions.

These initiatives open a market of ideas and with it a world of opportunities. Not only does this open marketplace allow South Africa to learn from other developing states, it grants our young nation the chance to explore and express itself among equals. It encourages us to critically and candidly develop our South African identity beyond the dictates of traditional, hegemonic truths.

Because of South Africa's myriad problems, our international strategy is often overlooked. While other states are self-confident about their Brics participation, South Africa has been more restrained. This trend should be reversed.

Unlike the years under the presidency of Jacob Zuma, where our foreign policy was disproportionately biased towards Russia and China, South Africa now has the opportunity to prudently balance and leverage its diplomacy for maximum effect. The prospects available through closer partnership in Brics should not entail growing apart from other partners. On the contrary, a successful and expanded Brics partnership affords comprehensive bargaining power while offering opportunities to advance domestic development.

The \$180-million loan that Eskom has secured from the New Development Bank to expand its renewable energy efforts, advancing its just transition from coal, is just one such example.

While care must be taken not to consider Brics as a foreign policy panacea, its resourcefulness should not be neglected.

This year's summit held particular promise for South Africa. Under the theme, Economic Growth For an Innovative Future, concepts such as the fourth industrial revolution were central. In Brics, South Africa has partners that are global leaders in technology and innovation; partners we must draw and learn from to decisively realise our national plans.

As an evolving multilateral organisation, Brics is open to the direction its members give it. To date not enough has been done to instil it with clear and persuasive significance. We must seize this opening, maximising its potential. We must steer and shape Brics according to our national interests. To do so, we must first commit much greater consideration to developing a comprehensive understanding of what Brics means for South Africa.

Dr Klaus Kotzé completed his PhD on Brics at the University of Cape Town