

Opportunities and obstacles to cooperation between the BRICS: a view from South Africa



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Cooperation between the BRICS states is often framed as being a part of new forms of South-South Cooperation (SSC). This is clearly problematic, given the presence of Russia, which is neither geographically nor historically part of the Global South, and China, which suffers from schizophrenia when it comes to its identity as part of the developing world. In spite of this, South-South rhetoric is used by both policymakers and scholars when referring to BRICS. This needs to be problematized as it suggests a particular kind of cooperation – different from traditional North-South cooperation. The idea of SSC tends to evoke a positive image of solidarity between developing countries through the exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge. This is intended to shift the international balance of power and help developing nations break away from aid dependence and achieve true emancipation from former colonial powers – with the underlying assumption that it is always mutually beneficial (mutual benefit being one of the principles of SSC identified by the UN office for SSC).

Many analyses of the BRICS are thus based on the implicit and somewhat vague assumption that trade between states engaged in SSC would be less exploitative than that between the South and the North; and, the belief that economic interactions

between states of the South would be more responsive to the development needs of the South. This supposedly distinguishes it from North-South cooperation where the interaction is usually one based on unequal relations of dependence. There needs to be greater critical engagement with the question of whether and how South-South, intra-BRICS and BRICS-Global South cooperation differs qualitatively from South-North cooperation in practice, especially as states often use positive assumptions about SSC to justify their activities. For example, China and India use it to justify what some regard as neo-imperialism in Africa, hiding behind the discourse of southern solidarity. Similarly, aspects of South Africa's cooperation with the rest of the continent has been criticised for being hegemonic or sub-imperialist. We cannot assume that cooperation amongst the BRICS and between the BRICS and the rest of the developing world will not promote relations of dependence, particularly when we take into account the tremendous stratification between different states in the global South.

When thinking about cooperation between the BRICS, it is important to ask what motivations these states may have for cooperating. Primarily, one could argue that the main rationale behind the BRICS grouping is a pragmatic one. Undoubtedly, all the BRICS states are pursuing their strategic economic, trade and geopolitical interests through this alliance. It is also an attempt by the members to strengthen their bargaining positions in international institutions. This fits nicely with the neoliberal institutionalist position that contends that cooperation between states only occurs when states clearly have something to gain from the interaction – in other words, when they are serving their own self-interest. The perception that there appears to be more willingness to gather around an economic agenda than around security issues further underlines this position. While there are obvious pragmatic motivations for cooperation amongst the BRICS, it is clear that there is also a strong ideational and even ideological undercurrent. These states also present themselves as campaigners for the reform of the current system of global governance. This suggests that, beyond pursuing their self-interest, there is something else driving cooperation – what some have called a common worldview. This leads us to the question: to what extent are elements like commonalities between participants and a shared worldview a prerequisite for successful cooperation?

In trying to answer this question, I will draw on some work that I am doing on friendship between states. I am not claiming that, in order to cooperate, states need to be friends. Nor am I suggesting that the BRICS states are friends. But the framework of friendship can provide us with some interesting indications for what the building

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blocs of successful and sustainable cooperation might be.

The notion of friendship is one that has intrigued philosophers for centuries, but has remained largely outside the analytical focus of International Relations. In fact, friendship is generally regarded as essentially alien to international politics. Many IR scholars would have us believe that states all behave indiscriminately similarly towards each other in their quest for survival and national security. But over the past two decades, constructivist scholars have pointed out that states' perceptions, which are based on previous interactions, shared values, and so forth, shape state interaction. While the notion of friendship is thus rare in IR theory, in practice, and especially in the language of statecraft, we see it appearing time and again. The Chinese government has, for example, become well versed in using the language of friendship to justify its activities in Africa (essentially, resource extraction). Statements like: "China and Africa...have established deep friendship of more than half a century based on equality and mutual benefit" have become commonplace.

So what does it mean for states to be friends, and what are the implications for cooperation? While there is no agreement as to what exactly friendship between states entails it is possible to identify certain criteria for or markers of friendship, including historical ties commonalities, ongoing interaction, institutionalisation and shared vision/worldview. I will briefly look at the last four.

Unlike the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA) states, which clearly have many commonalities, making the group a natural alliance, one of the major criticisms leveled against the BRICS is that the member states are too diverse to present any real prospect for unified action. One could, however, argue that the BRICS countries share a common experience in that they were all negatively affected by being on the periphery of a world system dominated by the United States and its Western allies. All members are striving to modernise their economies while simultaneously addressing social problems. In addition, all BRICS states are facing the challenge of rapid urbanisation and growing urban poverty. From a more critical perspective, civil society critics have noted that the BRICS also share socio-economic violations, including severe inequality, poverty, unemployment, inadequate education and health care, costly basic services and housing, constraints on labour organizing, and extreme levels of violence especially against women, political and

civil rights violations, such as widespread police brutality, increase securitization, media repression.

Ongoing interaction is another aspect often cited as a prerequisite for friendship and cooperation. Statistics show us that there has been increased interaction in the area of commercial relations between the BRICS states. Increased commercial ties also stimulate the expansion of linkages in other social arenas beyond the market - we see this in areas like tourism. Ultimately, high levels of interaction (including trade) is believed to increase trust between states, and helps to promote and cement friendship. Relatedly, some scholars explore international friendship as a pattern of institutionalised interactions - in other words, argues that friendship can be consolidated through the process of institutionalisation. While formal institution-building is a part of this (with the New Development Bank being the only example of formal BRICS institutionalisation thus far) informal forms of institutionalisation such as meetings, interactions, official ceremonies, and agreements are equally significant. The BRICS summits, meetings between ministers of finance and health, and so forth, are important in this regard. But so too is interaction between non-state actors, members of civil society, at events like this one.

All the summits thus far have called for greater cooperation among the members beyond the level of governments. Thus far, we have seen the establishment of the BRICS Academic Forum (now formalised through the formation of the BRICS Think Tanks Council) and the BRICS Business Council. We therefore need to view cooperation in a broad sense - not just in terms of economic or political cooperation, but also cooperation in the sense of sharing ideas and best practice. The IBSA model of sectoral cooperation across issue areas like education, tourism, climate change, agriculture could prove instructive in this regard.

Groupings or clubs like the BRICS do not have

democratic legitimacy, and lack accountability. It is therefore essential that civil society monitor the impact the group's policies are having on the populations not just of these five states, but also on other developing states. In July this year a group of South African civil society organisations submitted a concept note on the establishment of a BRICS Civil Society forum to the SA Sherpa. The idea is to develop a formal space for civil society to participate in the BRICS summits and influence its agenda, and to coordinate with the BRICS Think Tank and BRICS Business Councils. To date, civil society activity has been on the fringes: for example the BRICS from below initiative during the Durban summit in 2013. Civil society can contribute to democratising the discourse on BRICS, and also by playing a monitoring role. In order to play this role, civil society will have to be more innovative and address some challenges - such as the fractured collaboration between different kinds of African civil society groups. Civil society also needs to broaden engagement with academia. Overall, an increase in regular meetings between state and non-state actors will facilitate the exchange of ideas, allow for the debate of common challenges and help to identify issues on which the BRICS can speak with one voice.

Finally, one aspect of friendship between states is deemed particularly important by scholars of friendship in IR, namely a common vision or shared project. The BRICS members also claim to share a particular worldview, or at least share a sense of dissatisfaction with the current system of global governance. They have in common an interest in the reorientation of power towards multipolarity and a commitment to state sovereignty. In addition, the BRICS have articulated their common desire to reform what they regard as the unjust nature of the current global order, and have committed themselves to reforming global institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.

Despite all of the above, important differences remain. While they share a common concern about the need to reform the global governance system, they do not always agree on how this should be done. The debate about UN Security Council reform is a case in point. Similarly, when, in 2010, they had the opportunity to support a candidate from the global South for managing director of the IMF, they were unable to reach consensus. This raises questions around their ability to bring about reform of global institutions. It must not be forgotten that, while the potential of cooperation between the BRICS in the fields of commerce and trade remains great, they are also competitors and even rivals, particularly in Africa.



Multiple, and often contradictory, foreign policy commitments have already proven very difficult for the South African government to navigate. This points to another potential stumbling bloc for greater BRICS cooperation relates to the commitments individual BRICS members have to other alliances. All five BRICS states have existing and significant bilateral relations with states like the USA, which raises questions about the extent to which they are able to provide a counter pole to US power. In the case of South Africa despite the BRICS having a foreign policy priority, its position in Africa and regional organisations like the African Union will always take precedence over its alliance with the BRIC states. This is evident not only in South Africa's stated foreign policy (for example in the Department of International Relations' strategic plans) but also in its actions. In any cooperation agreement - for example relating to bilateral trade agreements, South Africa will have to take into account its existing commitments to the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the Southern African Development Community. Politically, South Africa generally abides by the African Union. For example on UNSC reform, South Africa has not joined the G4 (Brazil, India, Germany and Japan) pushing for UNSC reform as its loyalties lie first and foremost with the African Union position.

One could also ask to what extent South Africa's domestic imperatives and foreign policy vision dovetails with that of the other BRICs, in other words, to what extent greater cooperation with these states is in the country's national interest. There has been a mixed reaction in South Africa to the government's BRICS strategy - both within the ruling alliance and from civil society. Some applaud it as an alternative to western investment. On the other hand, there are those - including the trade unions - who argue that increased BRICS imports are hurting South Africa's manufacturing sector (which is key to job creation). Other critics (both from within the ruling party and from civil society) warn that aligning too closely with China and Russia can be damaging to South Africa's role as a state that is regarded as a moral power that promotes democracy and human rights.

With regard to greater civil society engagement, obstacles also abound. One needs to take cognisance of the fact that civil society groups have limited resources and do not necessarily see engaging with the BRICS as a priority, in light of domestic challenges like poverty and inequality requiring urgent attention. This is linked to the fact that, historically, there has been a lack of engagement between civil society

and foreign policy issues. Clearly, a big stumbling bloc in cooperation between BRICS civil societies is the huge discrepancy between the positions and status of civil society in the individual BRICS states. While civil society is reasonably strong and visible in India, Brazil and South Africa, the situation looks very different in Russia and China. This impacts on the level of engagement with and influence civil society can exert over national policymakers.

In conclusion, the grouping is still young and will have to prove itself in terms of its ability to engender real, meaningful and mutually beneficial cooperation between member states. Continuous engagement with the intergovernmental grouping by academics and other members of civil society will be crucial to ensuring that the BRICS grouping makes the kind of contribution to global governance that will address the existing global inequalities and improve the lives of the majority of the world's people. 🍌