

# South Africa's Role in BRICS amidst Emerging World Order

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## Abstract:

The purpose of the study is to identify South Africa's role in BRICS in the context of the crisis of the existing system of international relations and its participation in the processes of shaping the new world order. It analyzes the role of South Africa that presides over BRICS in 2023 and its overall impact on the existing world order. The study relies on a systemic approach. South Africa's role as a country, which is gaining significant political and economic weight, is constantly growing thanks to its fast paced development and desire to participate in shaping and implementing the agenda of the new world order. Developing countries increasingly disagree with the rules and values promoted by the West and claiming their own vision of the world. South Africa

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is one of those countries that aspire to take an active part in the establishment of an international order. The article demonstrates the current trends in political and economic spheres and elucidates South African contribution to the BRICS agenda.

**Keywords:**

South Africa, BRICS, world order, Africa, international relations

**For citation:**

Vladislav V. Kruchinsky, Margarita A. Iurova, Ekaterina V. Pogorelaya, Damir Shaymardanov (2023). South Africa's Role in BRICS amidst Emerging World Order. *Governance and Politics*, 2(2), P. 95–109. DOI: 10.24833/2782-7062-2023-2-2-95-109

**BRICS** as international forum is still of high importance in the international arena. All participants of this group share the aim to transform the existing world on the principles of mutual respect, justice and equality, the protection of sovereignty. These days BRICS brings about not only new opportunities, but also new challenges, which can be overcome only by closer cooperation between the members and mutual work towards constructing a fairer world order. The adopted Beijing Declaration underlined the BRICS approach to reforming the global system, specifically addressing Africa's significance in the process. In order to emphasize the South Africa's role in BRICS and to identify the extent of its actual involvement in shaping the emerging new world order, the research is aimed at examining South Africa's contribution to developing the BRICS agenda and its role as one of the leaders on the African continent.

South Africa's role as a country gaining significant political and economic weight is found to be growing constantly due to its recent development and willingness to participate in the process of shaping and implementing the agenda of the new world order that is emerging nowadays.

South Africa, viewing BRICS as a stable association of sovereign states, a group of "like-minded" societies, a political force capable of influencing global processes, and having a strong reputation on the African continent and globally, in its year of presidency, intends to achieve coordinated assistance by the group

to meet important objectives for Africa (addressing inequality, poverty and increasing the capacity of the domestic African labour market) (Денисова, 2014; Киртон, 2022).

An analysis of South Africa's statements reflects its willingness to act on the basis of continuity and to devote considerable effort to reform international economic institutions and the United Nations, whose role in peacekeeping and conflict resolution remains important, requiring the revision of supranational regulatory instruments in accordance with the global changes in the system of international relations.

In December 2022 South Africa's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that South Africa aims to support the effective functioning of BRICS in various spheres. According to Naledi Pandor, South Africa's foreign minister, the country will act on the basis of a consensus and will provide strategic guidance to the group by working with other states, including setting agendas and priorities. The South Africa's priorities for its presidency are:

- developing partnerships towards a just transition;
- modernizing education and skills development;
- harnessing new opportunities that might arise from an African Continental Free Trade Area agreement;
- accelerating post-pandemic socio-economic recovery;
- achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- strengthening multilateralism, including reforms of global governance institutions and strengthening women's participation<sup>5</sup>.

The key slogan of the South African Presidency, "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism" shapes the BRICS core objectives, the desire to develop cooperation among the participating countries and the consideration of the African agenda. The minister stressed the importance of ensuring continuity in

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<sup>5</sup> Finmarket. (2023, March 30). В 2022 г. рост товарооборота между Россией и ЮАР составил 16,4%. URL: <http://www.finmarket.ru/news/5923912> (accessed 12.04.2023)

BRICS and noted that South Africa also aims to work in partnership with key actors of the global South on issues related to global governance and reform of leading international organizations<sup>6</sup>.

The Beijing Declaration of the XIV BRICS Summit, 2022<sup>7</sup> outlines the group's priorities for the near future: bridging the development and technology gap between the North and the South, requiring reform of international economic organizations with supranational regulatory functions (above all the WTO and IMF) to remove trade barriers and create an open and sustainable global economy and reforming the United Nations to be more inclusive and effective. South African President Ramaposa expects the BRICS countries to lead the reform of international organizations and the establishment of new decision-making mechanisms within them, as well as the entire international structure for the benefit of the majority of the world and creating a new world order.

On 18 January, 2023 Naledi Pandor spoke about the forum's prospects for development and areas of strengthening its position in the world in an interview with RIA Novosti. In particular, it was stated that South Africa opposes a unipolar world and seeks to pursue an independent policy of cooperation with all world powers, supporting the search for an alternative to the global domination of the dollar through the work of the New Development Bank and "other institutional arrangements"<sup>8</sup>.

The world is wary and interested in the changes in the BRICS group to create an alternative economic order. The impetus for this has been provided by the US anti-Russian sanctions, and the New Development Bank. The latter is headquartered in China and might become an institution capable of mobilizing resources "for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging markets and developing countries".

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022, June 23). XIV BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration. URL: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202206/t20220623\\_10709037.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202206/t20220623_10709037.html) (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>7</sup> Morgan E. (2023, May 4). Interest in the BRICS New Economic Order. BRICS Information Portal. URL: <http://infobrics.org/post/38322/> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>8</sup> RIA NOVOSTI. (2015, May 9). Мировые лидеры на праздновании Дня Победы в Москве (09.05.2015). URL: <https://ria.ru/20150509/1063607557.html> (accessed 12.04.2023)

The New Development Bank's expansion and the creation of a new reserve currency could be an important factor in the expansion of the BRICS group. The South African foreign minister announced 21 letters from countries interested in membership, including African countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia.

Many African countries have external debt, mostly to multilateral organizations, which has caused growing concern as the US dollar remains the dominant reserve currency. It engenders the discussions on reforming the global financial system and the new economic order announced by the BRICS, monitoring economic developments and assessing the likely economic consequences for the region<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, South Africa declares its willingness to lead the emerging African sub-system and to represent the interests of the entire African continent in international political and economic relations (Шубин, 2016).

South Africa is Russia's important economic partner and one of the five largest trading partners on the African continent. In 2022, trade between Russia and South Africa increased by 16.4% compared to 2021, reaching \$1.3 billion<sup>10</sup>. This gives additional impetus to the development of relations between the two countries, both bilaterally and within the BRICS format. It is important for South Africa to increase cooperation, especially in vital sectors such as mining, defense and agriculture<sup>11</sup>. It is also interested in having its navy trained to a high level to participate in peacekeeping missions and to defend the country.

South Africa already represents the voice of the African continent in various international fora. South Africa adheres to the consolidated African agenda and aspires to use BRICS so as to enhance strategic cooperation advocating for the so-called 'South-South' cooperation. Incumbent South African president Cyril Ramaphosa appears to be willing to diversify ties with non-Western countries

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<sup>9</sup> RIA NOVOSTI. (2023, January 18). Глава МИД ЮАР: мы хотим пересмотра односторонних санкций, введенных США. URL: <https://ria.ru/20230118/pandor-1845663241.html> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>10</sup> Roscongress. (2023, May 2). Второй саммит. Экономический и гуманитарный форум Россия – Африка. За мир, безопасность и развитие. URL: <https://summitafrica.ru/en/> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>11</sup> Russian Foreign Trade. Russian foreign trade reports and reviews. Russian trade with South Africa in 2021. URL: <https://en.russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2022-02/russian-trade-with-south-africa-in-2021/> (accessed 12.04.2023)

following unjustified hopes for solidarity and unity during COVID-19. In January 2021, the president of South Africa strongly condemned unfair distribution of vaccines, calling it “the problem of vaccine nationalism”. Thus, nowadays BRICS is seen as an alternative to the liberal world order led by the Western countries. The economic potential of BRICS is enormous and tends to be politically realized<sup>12</sup>. With the South African presidency, it is becoming a major factor in shaping Africa’s image and strengthening its position on the international stage.

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It is necessary to take a closer look at South Africa’s economic performance. In 2021, South Africa’s GDP was estimated at 418 billion U.S. dollars and rated as the second-highest on the African continent. As for Human Development data, South Africa has middle human development index, ranking 109<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Report. Despite having problems with inflation, unemployment, slowing GDP growth, South Africa continues to be a leader among African countries thanks to a comparatively developed economy and infrastructure. South Africa attracts increasing amount of foreign direct investment, particularly in the areas of mining, manufacturing and financial services. According to the World Bank, in 2021 FDI amounted to USD 41.3 billion.

Today not only South Africa, but also the whole continent is striving to maximize the potential of its rising population in order to achieve higher human development indicators (Леонова, 2017). To do this, the African Union has taken 15 flagship development projects which cover among other things digital technology, logistics and health. Other areas such as energy, agriculture and gas industry require even more investments for development. One of the major flagship projects today is the African Continental Free Trade Area, which implies free movement of people and goods and is expected to boost investment inflow.

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<sup>12</sup> Sputnik. (2023, March 7). South African President Reshuffles Cabinet, Picks New VP, Ministers. URL: <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230307/south-african-president-reshuffles-cabinet-picks-new-vp-ministers-1108138571.html> (accessed 12.04.2023)

African countries are increasingly focused on defending their own national interests, so they are looking for a unique model of interaction in which they have nothing to lose. That is why the Russia-Africa summit remains a unique opportunity for both sides to combine their potentials and capabilities and avoid possible “black swans”.

South Africa has benefited greatly from trade with the BRICS countries, getting opportunities in terms of investment, economic development and business cooperation. Such spheres as energy, telecommunications, transport and infrastructure have been boosted by strengthening economic links with the BRICS group. According to the official statistics, South Africa's total trade with BRICS has increased significantly, which was estimated at R702 billion in 2021.

China remains a main trade partner, which has turned out to be interested in deepening economic relations with South Africa. The ties between China and South Africa are strategic since China actively promotes its own agenda within the framework of interests of developing countries and advocates for the development of its Belt and Road Initiative.

As for relations between South Africa and India, it is important to highlight that there is a certain spiritual connection between the two countries. The mutual struggle for independence and for a better and fairer world has been evident in both countries that were colonized by the Western powers. The economic relations have demonstrated stable rise, with bilateral trade growing. It was estimated at approximately USD 17 billion, which lags behind the volumes of trade between South Africa and China. Still, New Delhi's government attempts to expand its authority in the region.

As for the economic ties between South Africa and Brazil, the trade indicators have not been that high over recent years. Brazilian's former president Jair Bolsonaro disregarded African countries' potential. However, the arrival of Lula da Silva as president of Brazil renewed expectations for improving economic and political relations between both states relying on the previous experience. Lula's “African heritage” seems to be of crucial importance, as it has left a positive trail behind and has evoked hopes for a higher level of cooperation between the leading states of both continents.

Russia is one of the most important partners of South Africa and many other African states (Архангельская, 2015). The importance and intensity of political and economic ties with Russia has been gradually increasing since the beginning of the 21st century. In October, 2019 Sochi became the venue of the unprecedented Russia-Africa summit, which was visited by the high-ranking officials of 54 African countries, including the Republic of South Africa<sup>13</sup>. The enormous interest of both Russia and its African counterparts in strengthening and developing relations was highlighted by the Russian President in his speech at the International Parliamentary Conference “Russia-Africa in a multi-polar world”, noting that many enterprises, infrastructure and social facilities have been built on the African continent with the help of Russia. More than \$20 billion of African debt to Russia has been written off. Trade turnover is steadily increasing, and settlements in national currencies will also contribute to this. The Second Russia-Africa summit is scheduled to be held in Saint-Petersburg from the 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2023. Economic and humanitarian issues are to be at the top of the agenda<sup>14</sup>.

Russia develops relations with the African continent not only at the highest level. The 2023 Russia-Africa Parliamentary Conference gave a new impetus for enhancing Russia's existing ties with African nations, including the Republic of South Africa<sup>15</sup>.

The diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Africa were established in 1992. These relations have been warm throughout their 30-year history. Earlier Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov made a tour of African countries. Sergey Lavrov once again visited the Republic of South Africa, where he held talks with his South-African counterpart Naledi Pandor and Cyril Ramaphosa, the President of the Republic of South Africa<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Finmarket. (2023, March 30). В 2022 г. рост товарооборота между Россией и ЮАР составил 16,4%. URL: <http://www.finmarket.ru/news/5923912> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022, June 23). XIV BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration. URL: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202206/t20220623\\_10709037.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202206/t20220623_10709037.html) (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>15</sup> Morgan E. (2023, May 4). Interest in the BRICS New Economic Order. BRICS Information Portal. URL: <http://infobrics.org/post/38322/> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>16</sup> Roscongress. (2023, May 2). Второй саммит. Экономический и гуманитарный форум Россия – Африка. За мир, безопасность и развитие. URL: <https://summitafrica.ru/en/> (accessed 12.04.2023)



The Republic of South Africa is Russia's crucial economic partner in Africa, with their trade turnover exceeding \$1.13 billion in 2021<sup>17</sup>. South Africa has been among the five largest trading partners of the Russian Federation on the African continent for a number of years<sup>18</sup>. It grants additional impetus to the development of relations between the two nations both bilaterally and within the BRICS format.

South Africa is in favor of reforming the UN Security Council and has officially announced its intention to seek a seat as a permanent member<sup>19</sup>. This is the indisputable proof of the high degree of autonomy in South Africa's foreign policy, as well as its desire to actively participate in world politics and its willingness to act globally. This way South Africa articulates its readiness to become a regional or great power and lead the emerging African subsystem representing the interests of the entire continent in international political and economic relations.

It is noteworthy that Russia recognizes the need to reform the UN and adapt it to modern realities, including the relevance of expanding the representation of African states in the UN Security Council<sup>20</sup>.

Since the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, which triggered many Western countries to impose sanctions against Russia in 2022, South African has demonstrated the independence of its foreign policy. The Republic abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly (GA) on the resolution ES-11/1 "Aggression against Ukraine" on March 24, 2022. South Africa's and a number of other African states' non-accession to anti-Russian sanctions is important both for the Russian Federation and African countries themselves, as it preserves their cooperation on various political and economic issues.

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<sup>17</sup> Russian Foreign Trade. Russian foreign trade reports and reviews. Russian trade with South Africa in 2021. URL: <https://en.russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2022-02/russian-trade-with-south-africa-in-2021/> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>18</sup> South African Government News Agency. (2023, March 9). SA to work with BRICS countries to advance African agenda. url: <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/sa-work-brics-countries-advance-african-agenda> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>19</sup> TASS. (2022, December 12). В ЮАР назвали приоритетом председательства в БРИКС укрепление связей внутри группы. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16569197>. (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>20</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023, January 23). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks during a meeting with President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa, Pretoria, January 23, 2023. URL: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1849379/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1849379/) (accessed 12.04.2023)

South Africa's reaction to the fact that the US Congress passed a bill to prosecute African countries that support Russia in various ways is sharply negative, as it violates international law (Джабраилова, 2022). The country's leadership has made this clear to the US because, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has stressed, the adopted law is detrimental to the interests of the peoples of African countries.

This is not the only time South Africa supports Russia, even against the pressure of Western governments. For instance, South Africa shared and openly approved Russia's position on settling the Syrian crisis<sup>21</sup>.

One of the recent examples of South Africa's independent foreign policy was the participation of its Navy along with Russian and Chinese Navies in their joint military exercises in the Indian Ocean near South Africa's coast on February 17-27, 2023<sup>22</sup>. Undoubtedly, American and European political elites could not approve this, but South Africa once again demonstrated that in its foreign and domestic policy it puts a premium on its own national interests, and not other states' wishes.

Thus, South Africa secures for itself the role of an independent international policy actor and a rising power capable of pursuing its own policy, despite dissatisfaction and even pressure from influential Western countries. Russia is one of South Africa's key partners that can help the Republic of South Africa become a real power in the foreseeable future (Жамбиков, 2022).

We also can register a steady growth of cooperation between the BRICS members in terms of multilateral diplomacy. For instance, during the pandemic of COVID-19 a new vaccine center – the BRICS Research and Development Center – was launched in 2022. Such joint ventures appear to be of great significance, because they stimulate vaccine studies and accumulate knowledge and experience in medical and scientific spheres. Some experts deem it necessary

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<sup>21</sup> Парламентская газета. (2016, September 27). ЮАР поддерживает позицию России по Сирии. URL: <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/2016/09/27/yuar-podderzhivaet-pozitsiyu-rossii-po-sirii.html> (accessed 12.04.2023)

<sup>22</sup> Vedomosti.ru. (2023, February 17). Россия, Китай и ЮАР начинают совместные военно-морские учения. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/02/17/963325-rossiya-kitai-i-yuar-nachinayut-sovmestnie-ucheniya> (accessed 12.04.2023)

the creation of alternative institutions within the BRICS framework due to the fact that the World Health Organization did not live up to the expectations of developing countries for a better and healthier place. In addition, the Russian Sputnik vaccine was not recognized by the organization despite its high effectiveness. Therefore, the establishment of alternative institutions could be a get-away for developing countries, which strive for increased presence in the international arena.

The initiated process of dedollarisation by the BRICS countries also should be mentioned (Кондратов, 2021). Seeking to undermine the dollar's hegemony in the world, the members of BRICS appear to be confident about reshaping the current global economic order. We can record several trends that are currently developing.

Firstly, China has accumulated considerable power and weight, increasingly expanding its sphere of economic and political influence. Bilateral trade in local currencies is being discussed, with yuan and rupee gaining the most attention and recognition from the rest of developing countries. The usage of Chinese currency "yuan" or Indian currency "rupee" is likely to provoke the process of ousting the dollar from the global economic order, with Asian economies gaining more clout in the international arena. Secondly, Brazil, led by Lula da Silva, is seeking not only regional leadership, but also the global one, actively pursuing its own agenda (ЯН, 2022). The issue of abandoning the dollar is also being considered by Brazil, which wants to achieve this on a bilateral level with Argentina.

Depolarized trade is no longer a fiction, but a part of the present, which should not be omitted in any manner. New Development Bank (NDB) of BRICS is claimed to undertake the process of dedollarisation and create common currency, which would be utilized to put an end to dollar dominance (Агоннуде, 2022).

BRICS is the epitome of cooperation between global political and economic giants full of potential and resources that can offer developing states new mechanisms and ways of development and establish a new world order (Купер, 2022). All members of the group are united by a common goal – coordinated cooper-

ation in transforming the existing world on the principles of mutual respect, justice, equality and sovereignty. The BRICS group remains an international platform for realizing such intentions, bringing together developing countries from different continents and giving new impetus to their projects.

South Africa joined BRICS seeking opportunities to increase its global influence. The Republic is ready to challenge American dominance in Africa as well. It has a political will to become a regional leader, historical experience of being an active political actor in that part of Africa, numerous traditional resources, such as vast territory, natural resources, technological and scientific advantage in comparison with other countries of this region, and conducts independent foreign and domestic policy. South Africa sees American primacy in the world arena incompatible with its foreign policy and South Africa has the will to defend its interests and hold independent policy. South Africa's presidency in BRICS in 2023 evokes certain hope for enhancing the relations between member states.

*Conflicts of interest:* the authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

Получено в редакции: 20 апреля 2023 г.

Принято к публикации: 01 июня 2023 г.

DOI: 10.24833/2782-7062-2023-2-2-95-109

УДК: 327

Международные отношения / исследовательская статья

### **Роль ЮАР в БРИКС в условиях формирующегося мирового порядка**

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**Аннотация:** В статье раскрывается роль ЮАР в БРИКС в условиях кризиса существующей системы международных отношений и в контексте ее участия в процессах формирования нового мирового порядка. Авторы анализируют деятельность ЮАР, председательствующей в БРИКС в 2023 г. и ее растущее международное влияние. Исследование опирается на системный подход. Роль ЮАР как государства, приобретающего значительный политический и экономический вес в регионе и мире, постоянно возрастает благодаря ее быстрому развитию и стремлению участвовать в формировании и реализации международной повестки дня. Развивающиеся страны все чаще выражают несогласие с правилами и ценностями, продвигаемыми Западом и претендующими на собственное видение справедливой системы международных отношений. Южная Африка является одной из тех стран, которые стремятся принять активное участие в установлении международного порядка. В статье показаны современные тенденции в политической и экономической сферах, освещен вклад ЮАР в повестку дня БРИКС.

**Ключевые слова:** ЮАР, БРИКС, мировой порядок, Африка, международные отношения

*Конфликт интересов:* авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликтов интересов

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