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Being Africa's BRIC(S): South Africa's foreign policy turn from 'Neo-Liberalism' to the 'New Era'

Chris Alden[a] and Maxi Schoeman[b]

[a]London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom; [b]University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article explores the conduct of South Africa during its years of being Africa's only BRIC(S), until the BRICS Summit of 2023 which saw two other African states join the group. The transformation in South African foreign policy during the BRICS years owes much to its reading of the changing international system, one in which the declining West was being supplanted by emerging powers led by China's expanding economy, astute diplomacy and modernising military. Mindful of the shifting power relations, South Africa sought a position in BRICS and gradually aligned its foreign policy with its most powerful members. Shared ambitions for reform of glaring inequalities in the liberal international order at times gave way to apologist positions for violations of sovereignty and human rights. The South African case represents the dilemmas of the democratic Global South in responding to contemporary trajectories of change in the international system.

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Introduction

South Africa, once the embodiment of Western liberal aspirations for the Global South and whose post-apartheid foreign policy was linked – if imperfectly – to these values and aspirations in its policy implementation, became over time disillusioned with that same Western-led liberal order. Within the context of the global transition from unipolarity to multipolarity which is underway,[1] this article explores the conduct of South African foreign policy during its years as Africa's only member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), until 2023 when the group offered membership to, among others, two African states – Egypt and Ethiopia. At its heart, the transformation in South African foreign policy during the BRICS years owes much to its reading of the changing international system, one in which the inexorably declining West, coupled to the failings of neo-liberalism, was being supplanted by a rising East, led by China's expanding economy, astute diplomacy and modernising military, with BRICS as a crucial instrument for achieving these aims. Seeing real change as being fostered through power, and mindful of the shifting power relations in the global system, South Africa sought a position in the self-styled informal grouping of BRICS, and then gradually began to align

CONTACT Chris Alden j.c.alden@lse.ac.uk

its foreign policy with the group's most powerful members. Shared ambitions for reform of glaring inequalities in the liberal international order have at times given way, however, to apologist positions for violations of sovereignty and human rights. In this, the South African case represents the dilemma of much of the democratic Global South in positioning itself within the contemporary trajectory of change in the international system, often opting for informal organisations which are not under dominance from the Global North, particularly the US.

In the first section of this article, attention is paid to the rise of informal international institutions (often referred to as 'informals') and the reasons set out by countries, specifically emerging powers in the Global South, for joining such groups. This is followed in section two by a discussion of South Africa's ascension to BRICS membership and the changes over time in its foreign policy conduct. The discussion in section three focuses on events and trajectories that illustrate South Africa's changing foreign policy orientation since its BRICS ascension in 2010. Section four covers South Africa's response to the 'BRICS new era' and its increasingly fraught relations with the West, while BRICS expansion, including the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB; often also referred to as 'the BRICS bank'), forms the focus of section five.

The move to informal international institutions

Charles Roger and Sam Rowan[2] point to the exponential growth in state-led informal international global governance institutions, particularly since the early 1960s. Such informal organisations, according to the authors, exhibit three core elements: firstly, they are created by states; secondly, they exhibit a minimum threshold of institutionalisation (they have regular meetings; they have a committee structure, and they have common decision-making procedures) and thirdly, such an organisation is established through a non-binding arrangement. Rationalist institutionalists, usually taking as their starting point the G7 as a blueprint for what these organisations are and what they do, explain that states join or form these club-like organisations based on the 'logic of instrumental calculations' on functionality, efficiency and material self-interest.[3] According to John Kirton and Marina Larionova, 'states create institutions because they see the benefits from the functions performed by these institutions, cooperate and follow rules because they calculate the costs and benefits which accrue from the institutional arrangements and want to maximise their gains.'[4]

Yet, as pointed out for example in the work of Oliver Stuenkel on the reasons for Brazil's 'embrace' of informal institutions,[5] countries in the Global South view such institutions as more than 'merely' providing efficiency and promoting material self-interest, thereby maximising their gains. Following Stuenkel, this article points to four reasons, closely intertwined with the power hierarchy of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, that explain why countries in the Global South, and especially so-called emerging Global South powers, join or establish informal international governmental organisations (IIGOs) – in addition to a continued commitment to formal organisations such as the UN. Those four reasons are: a search for status; grievance; frustration; and the drive to challenge existing power relations.

Amitav Acharya, reflecting on early 21st Century world order,[6] points to actors pursuing regional arrangements in 'seeking a return to a multipolar world order', and distinguishes between multipolarity as a 'strategic pursuit' and multipolarity as a

'normative quest'. For him there are three differences between these objectives. Some states strategically pursue multipolarity, utilising their military and economic resources to achieve status as a 'pole' within a balance of power context, often seeking weaker partners in order to develop a 'sphere of influence'. Normative multipolarity, in contrast, supports international law and institutions and pursues cooperation among states, with a view to attaining common goals at the global level.

For South Africa, as will become clear, normative multipolarity has played a big role in its membership of BRICS. From the early days of the 'new South Africa' its adherence to international law and institutions, including the United Nations and multilateralism, served as a driving force in its foreign policy in a fairly consistent way, although, as will be argued, such a normative commitment at times wore thin. Acharya's distinction between strategic and normative multipolarity implies a dichotomy, yet in practice, and as clearly evidenced in BRICS as a sub-global informal, this 'partnership belt' – to use Yaroslav Lissovolik's concept[7] – thus far has allowed for a (though at times uneasy) co-existence between BRICS members, regardless of their approach to multipolarity. On the one hand, there are those like China and Russia (and India to some extent) first and foremost focused on the strategic benefits of membership in relation to multipolarity, and on the other hand, there are those members viewing their association through a largely normative lens, such as Brazil and South Africa.

The question of course is, in an expanded BRICS populated by new members intent on 'strategic pursuit' – Saudi Arabia,[8] Iran, the United Arab Emirates – will those who seek multipolarity as a normative quest be able to leverage their membership to achieve their objectives?

Examining South Africa's BRICS membership within the context of the country's foreign policy ideals and objectives since 1994, this article points to the extent to which BRICS membership carries a logic that allows the country to pursue its domestic and international aims, keeping in mind the four reasons behind the attraction of Global South 'informals' to a state such as South Africa. This is not to imply that only states in the Global South create, or choose to join, informal institutions. South Africa, and for that matter several other Global South countries – among them Brazil and India – also belong to the G20 (another informal), alongside states from the Global North. Such membership at the very least serves the objective of status-seeking and providing an opportunity to – if not challenge existing power relations – be 'part of the mix'.

South Africa's ascension to BRICs

The 2010 invitation to join the BRICs configuration marked a turning point in South African foreign policy and one which is likely to ultimately contribute to the re-orientation of its foreign policy away from the West. In this regard, China played a crucial part in encouraging South Africa to join BRICS. Through its prominent position in financing infrastructure development across the African continent, China became increasingly important to achieving Pretoria's own strategic aims in the region.

Prior to its ascension to BRICs, and instrumental to its rising status in the post-Cold War international system, post-apartheid South Africa played a central part in the establishment of the IBSA Trilateral Cooperation Forum, an early Global South informal aimed at challenging the position, assumptions and dominance of the Global North. Established

in 2003 by the leaders of India, Brazil and South Africa, IBSA framed itself as a cluster of like-minded regional leaders from the Global South who shared democratic values, market-oriented economies and the imperative of promoting development.[9] They conducted an annual leaders' summit, formalised their initiative through inter-ministerial cooperation agreements and set up an IBSA development fund which, working in conjunction with the UN Development Programme, financed small development projects in each of their immediate regions.[10] Germany's alignment with IBSA's bid a year later during the institutional efforts to expand the UN Security Council[11] underscored the social democratic perspective of these committed multilateralists.

During the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), South Africa's seminal role in the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), launched with the G7 economies, demonstrated both his commitment to a neoliberal solution to African development dilemmas – including the appropriation of the peer review process of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to enhance African governance – and a willingness to lead the continent.[12] Most notably, neither Mbeki and his African cohorts (Nigeria, Algeria and Senegal) in NEPAD, nor their G7 counterparts thought it necessary to include China in this process. China was an afterthought, incorporated at the G7/8 Summit in Gleneagles in 2005 by the Blair administration.[13] The G7/8 Summit hosted by Germany in 2007 formalised the involvement of the IBSA countries as part of the 'Outreach 5' (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, South Africa) through the Heiligendamm Process, setting the stage for a gradualist approach to deepening cooperation between the leading industrial countries and the emerging economies of the Global South.[14]

At the same time, China and Russia's revival of their bilateral partnership in 2005, following from the launch of Beijing's first foray into regional security building, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, opened the way for greater international activism. Informal meetings between China, Russia, India and Brazil on the margins of the UN in 2006 reinforced cooperation, marked by some pundits as the start of the grouping. The onset of the global financial crisis in September 2008, exposing the catastrophic failure of US leadership in managing the international economic system, set the stage for a new broader representative grouping of the world's leading economies. Despite the subsequent elevation of the G20 in 2008 as the primary site for managing the global financial crisis (seen by many at the time to be the future of global governance),[15] the balance of power between the industrialised countries and the emerging countries seemed to still rely upon the deep seated material power and political cohesion of the G7. For the emerging countries, those with the impulse towards matching Western power with Southern solidarity – as old as regional group politics in the United Nations[16] – argued for a strengthening of their position. The 2010 BRIC summit declaration explicitly endorsed the G20 as a 'more inclusive, diverse, representative and effective' forum and stated that '[w]e stand ready to make a joint contribution to this [formulation of a coherent strategy for the post-2008 crisis period] effort'.[17]

South African interest in joining the BRICs came to the fore at an official level as early as 2009.[18] South African Foreign Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane contacted the BRIC member states that same year, and newly elected South African President Jacob Zuma toured all four capitals in the following months to solicit support for Pretoria's candidacy. At the IBSA meeting in Brasilia, which doubled up with the BRIC Summit in April 2010, South African officials pressed for inclusion based on their position as Africa's only G20

member, its leadership role within NEPAD and its belief that the country could serve as an economic gateway to the continent.[19] At the G20 Summit in South Korea in November 2010, South African officials publicly voiced their interest in joining BRICs.[20]

Behind the enthusiasm within South Africa for membership in the group was the belief that, as Nkoana-Mashabane declared at a heads of mission conference within the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) in July 2011, membership would enable the country to continue its role as a 'bridge builder' among the 'progressive forces globally working for a better and just world order.'[21] Concurrently, its globally recognised financial sector, market-orientation and effective regulatory regime set it apart from other African countries.[22] Standard Bank, South Africa's leading bank with offices in eighteen African countries, threw its weight behind the idea that South Africa could serve as an economic gateway to the continent for BRICs countries.[23] South African membership in the group would serve both normative and economic objectives. Concerns about the impact of BRICs membership on the country's strategy for growing trade links with Brazil and India, and with continental Africa (the so-called 'butterfly strategy'), were soon put to rest in the belief that membership would deliver on the country's domestic development aspirations.[24] There is little doubt that status also played a role – as a middle power to be seen to be part of a group that had been hailed as the next drivers of the global economy, was, for South Africa, clearly an attractive option. In an undated document produced by the country's Department of Trade, Industry and Competition setting out the benefits of BRICS membership, the following is stated: 'Being a member of BRICS has enhanced South Africa's position and influence as an important emerging economy'. The same document also notes that 'BRICS membership is of strategic importance to our country'.[25]

Russian support for South African membership focused on its contribution to improving ties with the African Union and the Non-Aligned Movement, though Russian scholars noted that BRICS would serve as a vehicle for China to 'maximise its zone of influence'.[26] The Brazilian position, like that of India, conveyed concern about the impact on IBSA,[27] but Brazil generally welcomed what was seen as a like-minded democracy to the group. In the end, all of these issues were overcome by China's adroit diplomacy, publicly offering Pretoria a place in the group, expanding it to BRICS; this put any dissenting group member in an invidious position should they have wanted to veto the move.[28] As a result, in late December 2010, South Africa was formally invited to join BRICS as Africa's sole member, a position it would hold until the announcement of BRICS expansion during the 15th Summit in Johannesburg in 2023.

Sitting at the high table

Already, in its 2011 foreign policy white paper, Pretoria stated that 'South Africa will actively participate in the BRICS, whose members are reshaping the global economic and political order'.[29] It was clear that South Africa saw its membership of the group as an opportunity to recast its international relations, taking its 'rightful place in the new equitable world order'.[30] For South Africa, the spectacle of being a full BRICS member at the annual summit with its rhetoric of solidarity and global transformation was heady stuff that affirmed its own self-perceptions as Africa's leader. Global South solidarity had yielded a position for South Africa in the emerging international system that was

complementary to its global position as Africa's only G20 country. Moreover, the position presented opportunities for South Africa to demonstrate how its role within BRICS could facilitate the country's core foreign policy objectives, namely national and African development. This was soon put to the test as the government faced difficult decisions as an elected member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), as well as being added to the BRICS roster to host a summit in 2013.

South Africa's second tenure as an elected member on the UNSC (2011–2012) coincided with terms for India and Brazil as elected members, in addition to Russia and China as permanent members – meaning that all BRICS members were represented on the Security Council. During this tenure, a wave of popular unrest referred to as the 'Arab Spring' was toppling dictatorships across the Arab world. As the regime of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya struggled to suppress its opponents in the city of Benghazi, the UNSC debated humanitarian intervention to protect nascent democratic forces in Libya. Unlike the other BRICS countries that abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973 authorising a no-fly zone over Libya, and inadvertently paving the way for military intervention led by Britain and France, South Africa supported the measure.[31] This support for a Western-led resolution would have an important impact on the trajectory of South African foreign policy.

The backlash within South Africa itself to its role in facilitating what turned out to be a disastrous Western intervention into Africa was extreme. The African National Congress' National Executive Committee, the highest body within the party, held what was reportedly its first ever debate on foreign policy, condemning the South African vote on UNSC Resolution 1973. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ebrahim Ebrahim, noted that while South Africa voted to support humanitarian intervention, it ended up de facto authorising regime change: 'Many countries, including South Africa, feel betrayed by Western powers on resolution 1973 and would be very much reluctant to support any resolution sponsored by the United Kingdom, the United States and France on Syria.'[32] Former President Thabo Mbeki – the architect of the Western-oriented NEPAD initiative – was scathing in an editorial in the *Sunday Times*, declaring that the West was out to dominate Africa and use the UN to install 'leaders they preferred, to run the continent'.[33] In an open letter distributed widely across South Africa and the continent in August 2011,[34] a 'group of concerned Africans' pointed out that 'it [the UNSC] has become no more than an instrument in the hands and service of the most powerful within the system of international relations'. The UNSC had, according to the group, in effect reneged on its obligation to 'respect the imperative to uphold the will of the peoples, including the African nations.'

The Libya crisis marked a change in South Africa's position vis-à-vis the West, setting the course for an increasingly acrimonious relationship and a growing emphasis on a distinction between relations with the Global South and with the Global North. Its BRICS membership arguably gave it the confidence to increasingly take up anti-Western positions, showing at home and abroad that it was not in the Western 'camp'. Within annual BRICS Summit declarations, the need for reform of global institutions to be more representative of global realities became a regular feature. Grievance and frustration would find an outlet and support within BRICS. South Africa would also, in years to come, increasingly see itself as worthy of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.[35]

Simultaneously, the criticism from the continent around what was viewed as South Africa's lack of support for the African Union's roadmap for addressing the Libyan crisis [36] arguably strengthened the country's commitment to its African Agenda and the need to be 'seen' not to be on the side of the West. South Africa's first hosting of a BRICS Summit gave it an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment in both regards.

The BRICS Summit held in Durban in March 2013 put on full display the South African approach to summitry, with coordination between the Office of the Presidency, DIRCO, foreign policy think tanks, universities and civil society. The NDB, proposed at the previous BRICS Summit by India as the host country, received enthusiastic endorsement at the event. Importantly, beyond the conventional gathering, the South African government inaugurated a parallel BRICS event involving African leaders from other countries on the continent with the purpose of introducing them to the BRICS leaders and their entourage of government officials and businessmen.[37] This event – the BRICS Africa Outreach – underscored sentiment within South Africa that its role was one of interlocutor between BRICS and Africa, reflecting its role as an emerging middle power, though analysts were more sceptical of its actual substantive value.[38] Nevertheless, this initiative would prove important in terms of laying the basis for what would eventually become an expanded BRICS.

China followed the South African example when next it hosted the annual BRICS Summit (2017) in Xiamen by starting the 'BRICS Plus', with invitations to Global South countries beyond its immediate region to attend the summit. South Africa's BRICS Africa Outreach (and China's BRICS Plus) would, a decade later, result in the invitation to two other African countries – Egypt and Ethiopia – to become full BRICS members.[39]

The 2013 BRICS Summit proclaimed that South Africa, in the rhetoric of its government, was in a new foreign policy era, as the country was now recognised as a global actor of consequence.[40] There was also a strong belief that BRICS membership would promote and accelerate the country's – and the continent's[41] – economic growth and development. At the start of the summit, President Zuma told reporters: [42]

> Brics will stimulate employment through faster economic growth, improve the quality of education, skills development and innovation and build the capacity of the state to play a developmental role.

NDB launched at the Durban Summit

As noted above, the 2013 BRICS Summit saw the announcement of the establishment of the New Development Bank as a flagship programme of the fledgling group. South Africa vied for – and believed that it would be selected to host – the NDB headquarters[43] during the run-up to a decision on the location of the new bank, even going so far as to restructure the Southern African Development Bank to make way for this eventuality.[44] This expectation would be dashed, however. Instead, South Africa was host of the first of the NDB's regional offices for Africa, with other regional offices being rolled out gradually over the years that followed.[45]

Despite the disappointment of not hosting the NDB, the creation of the BRICS Bank would be hailed as an achievement for South Africa in (co-)leading the Global South in its quest for bolstering sustainable development through new capital resources as well as technical expertise from emerging economies, clearly marking a step towards the

larger goal of reform of the multilateral system.[46] A clear sign of the status of South Africa within the NDB is the fact that, along with the other four BRICS members, its initial US$10 billion subscription enables it to hold a voting share of 19.42%, whereas newer members of the NDB like Bangladesh and UAE have been allotted much smaller voting shares (under 2%).[47] At the same time, the locating of the NDB headquarters in Shanghai showed China's strong role in critical decisions.

The NDB also signifies an important development in that it is the creation of a formal institution by an informal grouping. Aligning the policy prescriptions and practices of the NDB as a formal institution with the recognised standards of peer financial institutions, as well as adapting the policy priorities of an informal grouping – the BRICS – into NDB strategy, became an important challenge for the bank going forward.

Promoting an alternative order after Libya

The other impact of joining the group was to give increasing prominence to BRICS in its declarative diplomacy in international settings. While early post-apartheid foreign policy consciously supported human rights and international law in an affirmation of liberal principles, over time the thrust of South African foreign policy became a wide-ranging critique of Western failings in managing the liberal international order. It was but a short step from that to promoting an alternative order as endorsed by BRICS and simultaneously muting any criticism of its members' violations of international law. By 2013 and the convening of the BRICS Summit in Durban, South African foreign policy alignment with BRICS' positions had become more pronounced, especially in the aftermath of NATO's incursion into Libya. For instance, South Africa endorsed the BRICS statement in 2014 in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its occupation of eastern Ukraine.[48] This was further underscored when South Africa, India, China and Brazil (along with 54 other nations) abstained from the March 2014 UN General Assembly resolution criticising the Crimea referendum. In language that anticipated the critique levelled at Western governments after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the BRICS stated, 'the escalation of hostile language, sanctions and counter-sanctions, and force does not contribute to a sustainable and peaceful solution, according to international law, including the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter.'[49] In reaction to the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against China's territorial claims to the South China Sea, South Africa called for direct negotiations between sovereign states to the dispute to the exclusion of outsiders (presumably the ICJ and the US), effectively sidestepping the authority of the ICJ over this issue and aligning with Beijing's preferences.[50]

Furthermore, the marked increase in abstentions by South Africa on human rights questions on China and Russia (and countries supported by China and Russia, such as Syria, Belarus and North Korea) coming before the UN Human Rights Commission and the UN General Assembly[51] was notable after its ascension to BRICS. These resolutions, South Africa claimed, showed the West's 'inconsistent human rights condemnations'.[52] For South Africa, BRICS membership offered an opportunity to more frequently and confidently challenge what it saw as great power (ie, US and Western) behaviour and to demonstrate its grievance and frustration with such behaviour.

Finally, starting with the BRICS Summit declaration of 2014, these declarations would annually express a preference for Brazil, India and South Africa to 'play a greater role in the

UN' due to their 'status and role in international affairs'.[53] This sentiment would over time turn into support, at least in the declarations up to the 2023 Summit declaration, for these three countries to become permanent members of the UN Security Council.[54]

New economic partners?

On the economic side of the equation, despite talk of the transformative effect that BRICS would have on South Africa's development prospects through new market and capital access, there was only limited evidence of this taking place. This is despite increased trade with its BRICS partners, which according to DIRCO Minister Naledi Pandor grew from R487 billion in 2017 to R702 billion in 2021.[55] South Africa did not manage to diversify its export profile in relation to BRICS in that period; the composition of its exports to its BRICS counterparts reinforced South Africa's traditional profile as an exporter of primary commodities, especially minerals and agricultural products.[56] A level of frustration with this situation became increasingly obvious in the run up to the 2023 BRICS Summit. Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition Ebrahim Patel expressed the situation in his opening remarks for the summit as follows:[57]

> While we will continue to export raw materials, we must not become trapped as the supplier of raw materials to other countries when there are opportunities to add value locally and create more jobs in South Africa. This is a classical neocolonial trap that must be avoided.

To the extent that South Africa has managed to grow its trade in manufactured and value-added products, such exports continue to go to partners on the continent or, to some extent, to the EU and the US. In fact, a 2024 report of the Centre for Development and Enterprise, a South African think tank, pointed out that South Africa has been deindustrialising, with the contribution of manufacturing to GDP halving between the 1980s and early 2020s.[58] Moreover, with the exception of China and to a lesser degree India, foreign direct investment from BRICS countries remained insignificant in comparison to that from traditional Western countries,[59] explaining the country's commitment to 'partnership' with the Global North and its efforts to maintain a semblance of smooth relations with the US in the face of political headwinds from the Biden and Trump administrations over a range of South African policy decisions.[60] Furthermore, the uneven economic relations between South Africa and the other BRICS members raised concerns from an early stage among former South African trade officials and scholars.[61] These added to concerns about economic complementarities within the group, as well as worries that South African industry would be 'usurped' by the stronger economies of the BRICS countries.[62]

No longer at ease: Domestic strife, global turbulence and the dawning of BRICS' 'New Era'

Jacob Zuma's controversial presidency, characterised by 'massive corruption,'[63] factionalism, patronage and rent-seeking – the so-called era of state capture[64] – ended with his resignation on 14 February 2018. However, Cyril Ramaphosa's ascendancy to the office of president following Zuma's resignation did not signal an end to the erosion of state institutions or political in-fighting within the governing African National Congress (ANC). On the contrary, the narrow margin of his victory over Zuma and his allies

during the ANC's December 2017 national conference merely exacerbated the divisions within the ruling party and set off another round of vicious competition. Factional strife between ANC party branches mirrored the successive battles in court as the South African legal system sought to bring the former president and his powerful cronies to account on corruption charges.

In this context, South African foreign policy became increasingly marginalised and even seemingly irrelevant to the domestic political forces involved in this extended power struggle. This period coincided with China and Russia's launching of the 'New Era of Global Development' in 2019.[65] China incorporated this idea of a 'New Era of Global Development' first in its January 2021 White Paper on international development[66] and subsequently as the theme of the 2022 BRICS summit. The announcement of the 'New Era' and the evolution of its principles and aims in the broader context of BRICS contributed to South Africa's apparently uncritical alignment with BRICS positions. This alignment was evident in the language of public statements from Pretoria on the New Era, most particularly on the conscious evocation by BRICS of the Bandung principles – namely support for national sovereignty, the UN Charter, human rights, and development.[67] Evident in these pronouncements was the influence of the 'Bandung Spirit', a term coined after the 2005 and 2015 'retro-Bandung' conferences in Indonesia.[68] South Africa would increasingly become critical of the Western-dominated liberal order and project itself as non-aligned, first in terms of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and then by filing a case against Israel over its alleged genocidal war on Gaza.[69] The 2022 BRICS Summit declaration adopting the 'New Era' (article 4), largely explains South Africa's turn away from neo-liberalism in the emphasis placed on development as a human right, and the call for the application of this principle 'without double standards' and in a 'non-selective, non-politicised and constructive manner'(article 9).[70]

At the same time, China's dominance of BRICS, and the impact it has had on South African foreign policy, continued to be the subject of heated debate among South African based scholars. For example, Lucky Asuelime pointed out that beyond economic competition between BRICS members themselves, there are inherent structural problems with the group: [71]

> (O)ne can argue that China is an agenda setter and decider in BRICS … . China's dominance within the group could complicate their professed goal of establishing a democratic global architecture of governance. Also quite ironically, an internally imbalanced BRICS has sought to create a more balanced global order.

These debates sharpened with the call by Beijing at the 14th BRICS Summit in June 2022 to improve the grouping through closer 'high quality cooperation' and for expansion of its membership. One South African analyst highlighted the growing proximity between BRICS' positions and China's diplomacy:[72]

> The BRICS' vision and spirit featuring mutual respect and understanding, equality, solidarity, openness, inclusiveness, and consensus is aligned to China's vision which seeks to uphold true multilateralism and pursue both solidarity and win-win cooperation.

Against this background, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 initially sparked an unexpectedly blunt rebuke from South Africa, with its representative at the UN declaring that Russia should 'immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine in line

with the UN Charter.'[73] Within a few days, however, President Ramaphosa had publicly reversed this position, allegedly disciplining the Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor for failing to consult with his office. A further resolution in March 2022 condemning the continued Russian presence in Ukraine was passed by a majority in the UN General Assembly. South Africa, however, along with the BRICS countries (except for Brazil who supported the resolution), abstained, declaring: [74]

> South Africa believes that the UN, especially in the context of Emergency Special Sessions … should be used as a platform to build bridges, address the divergence of views, provide recommendations and support for the parties to engage with the spirit of compromise, while de-escalating tensions, committing to the cessation of hostilities, and building trust and confidence.

The internal wrangling within South African elite circles did not stop, nor did the debates inside and outside government. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited South Africa in August 2022, reportedly to press for South Africa to support the US legislation aimed at stifling sanctions-busting activities by Africans in collusion with Russian interests. In response, at a joint press conference, DIRCO Minister Naledi Pandor rebuked the US, accusing it of hypocrisy:[75]

> Just as much as the people of Ukraine deserve their territory and freedom, the people of Palestine deserve their territory and freedom and we should be equally concerned at what is happening to the people of Palestine as we are with what is happening to the people of Ukraine. We've not seen an even-handed approach …. From some of our partners in Europe and elsewhere, there has been a sense of patronizing bullying — 'You choose this or else.' And the recent legislation passed in the United States of America by the House of Representatives, we found a most unfortunate bill.

South African criticism of what many interpreted to be the government's pro-Russian stance exposed the divisions within the academic, think tank and media communities and the government on Russian conduct. One commentator spelled out the dilemma: [76]

> Were we not in a BRICS alliance, I think it would be easier for the President Cyril Ramaphosa to use the protections afforded by our non-aligned stance to outright criticise Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a similar way that Mandela denounced the war-mongering George Bush in the Iraq War.

Adding to the concerns of Western governments about South Africa's tilt towards Russia was the controversy over the docking of a Russian container vessel in December 2022 at Simonstown naval yard. The ship turned off its transponder signal in the hours beforehand and arrived under cover of darkness, afterwards leaving for destinations on the south-eastern coast of Africa. Western media reports alleged that South Africa was supplying arms to Russia to replace its dwindling resources in the battle with Ukraine.[77] According to Guy Lamb, while the shipping manifest shows that Russian ammunition was unloaded during the Lady R's brief stopover in Simonstown, there was very little likelihood that South African munitions were transferred onto the container ship.[78] The US ambassador to South Africa nonetheless took up the issue in May 2023,[79] putting further strain on South African diplomatic claims of non-alignment in its conduct towards the war[80] and obliging Ramaphosa to appoint an independent panel to investigate the incident.[81]

Western pressure on the South African government had already increased with the declaration in March 2023 that Russian President Vladimir Putin should be tried as a war criminal in the Hague's International Criminal Court (ICC).[82] A showdown over South Africa's hosting of the BRICS Summit in September 2023, which would naturally involve all leaders – including Putin – and its obligations as a signatory to the Rome Statute to arrest the Russian leader, seemed inevitable.[83] On 24 April 2023, the ANC's National Executive issued a statement advising the government to withdraw from the Rome Statute rather than follow the rules it imposed on signatories. Underscoring a decisive shift in foreign policy outlook – and doing so in a manner seemingly designed to chastise the visiting Prime Minister of Finland whose country had broken decades of studied neutrality and joined NATO a few weeks before – Ramaphosa reaffirmed the decision to leave the ICC.[84]

However, again demonstrating the see-saw of South African foreign policy trapped between its liberal values and solidarity politics, a day later a government communique was issued explaining that a communications error had occurred and that South Africa would stay on as a member of the ICC.[85] Moreover, Pretoria sent a high-level delegation to Washington to explain its position and desperately stave off the request by a bipartisan congressional committee to the US State Department that the upcoming African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) Forum scheduled to be held in South Africa be moved elsewhere. The congressional letter said:[86]

> These actions by SA call into question its eligibility for trade benefits under AGOA due to the statutory requirement that beneficiary countries do not engage in activities that undermine US national security or foreign policy interests.

Behind the lightning visit to the US by the South African Trade Minister was real anxiety that this controversy might pave the way for expulsion from the US preferential trade agreement, AGOA, which contributed to key manufacturing and agricultural exports in an ailing South African economy.[87]

Concurrently, high level discussions were held in June with Chinese officials to see if Beijing might host the BRICS summit, replacing South Africa which was by now deeply concerned by the economic and reputational cost that it would incur by running the summit and letting Putin into the country.[88] In a bid to restore South Africa's diplomatic reputation, Ramaphosa petitioned to join the African leaders slated to visit Moscow and Kiev that same month with the aim of convincing the Ukrainian and Russian leaders to negotiate a settlement to the war.[89] Volodymyr Zelensky pressed for the African leaders to discuss prisoner of war exchanges with Russia while Vladimir Putin lectured them on their 'misguided' approach to the conflict. The mission had no discernible effect on bringing the conflict to an end.[90]

South Africa, Africa and the shape of the post-hegemonic global order

The BRICS Summit held in South Africa in August 2023 produced a declaration notable for its comprehensive coverage of global issues and its tone of urgency.[91] As one analyst put it: [92]

> BRICS can no longer wait to construct a global governance order that is more closely aligned with their interests; and they surely do not require permission from the Western world to

move forward. The prospect for 2024 and beyond is that an enlarged BRICS alliance will also coalesce in shaping policy discussions in several UN fora.

It is the BRICS' vision of a new world order, a 'New Era of Global Development', that coheres most closely with South Africa's foreign policy principles, with promises to deliver global equity in governance and development. And it is one that is both general in scope and ripe with the specifics as to contemporary challenges such as climate change, pandemics of disease, and the exponential growth of artificial intelligence. The decision to expand BRICS membership at the BRICS Summit hosted by China in June 2022 marked a new stage in realising these aspirations. Subsequent to the 2022 summit, more than twenty countries expressed their interest in joining the group, and at the Johannesburg BRICS Summit in 2023 six invitations were issued. The invitations from the BRICS to two African states (Egypt and Ethiopia), both of whom accepted and later joined the group, were followed a couple of months later by an invitation from the G20 to the AU to join that informal group. These developments have arguably blunted South Africa's advantage, to some extent marking the beginning of the end of South African exceptionalism on the global stage, at least in terms of being the 'sole African voice'.[93] Indeed, the fanfare that had accompanied South Africa's joining the BRICS, the G20 and the AU Commission from 2009 onwards, appears to have been the highwater mark of a belief – held in Pretoria, Washington, Brussels, Beijing, Moscow and several middle powers – that South African democracy, its resilient institutions and its liberal values made it eminently suitable to act as Africa's representative in international fora.[94] Its uneven performance in informal groupings, degenerating into outright incapacity at times, all leavened by spectacular incidents of state-fuelled corruption during Zuma's second term in office, appears to have tarnished this reputation in Western circles irrevocably. Furthermore, as was evident during South Africa's tenure as chair of the AU Commission (2012–2017), its credentials as a representative of African interests among fellow African states has been shown to be limited at best.[95]

At the same time, South Africa's foreign policy trajectory from advocate of human rights and a promoter of neoliberalism to proponent of the 'New Era for Global Development' reflects the growing belief that global transformation can be achieved through instruments like BRICS.[96] Even South African leadership in taking Israel to the ICJ in late 2023 on charges of genocide in Gaza, part and parcel of its Mandela era human rights advocacy policy, sits uneasily with its equivocation on hosting Putin at the BRICS Summit (Putin in the end sent his foreign minister) and calls within the ANC for a withdrawal from the ICC.[97] And on neoliberalism, as South Africa's Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor declared, 'This is not the world we hoped for when the Cold War ended. This is not the world we promised our people in the 2030 Agenda.'[98]

Conclusion

This article has explored the conduct of South African foreign policy during its years of being Africa's only BRIC(S), until the BRICS Summit of 2023 which saw two other African states join the group. The transformation in South African foreign policy during the BRICS years owes much to its reading of the changing international system, one in

which the declining West was being supplanted by emerging powers led by China's expanding economy, astute diplomacy and modernising military. Mindful of the shifting power relations, South Africa sought a position in BRICS and gradually aligned its foreign policy with its most powerful members.

South Africa's normative quest for multipolarity has allowed it to simultaneously reap strategic benefits from association with BRICS powers and the West. However, this position may be increasingly difficult to sustain. In a world where great power competition steers the direction of global politics and economic choice, a principled defence of a tarnished liberal internationalism is harder to square with requirements of exhibiting group solidarity with the putative architects of a new world order. Moreover, the sunset on South Africa's self-belief in its unique standing on the continent further narrows the possibilities for South Africa to act as Africa's interlocutor in informal groups like BRICS. Domestically, the 2024 national elections outcome – which saw the formation of a government of national unity among parties with widely divergent foreign policy approaches – points to changed dynamics within the government and serious challenges for the conduct of Pretoria's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Global South and partnerships with the Global North.[99] Shorn of the conditions that guided the country's foreign policy for three decades, the need for a recalibration of South African foreign policy seems both necessary and inevitable.

Notes

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Notes on contributors

Chris Alden lectures at the London School of Economics and Political Science and is director of LSE IDEAS. He has published widely on South African foreign policy and emerging powers in Africa as well as on foreign policy analysis.

Maxi Schoeman is an emeritus professor in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria. She has published extensively on South African foreign policy and Africa's changing political economy.