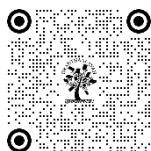


SOUTH AFRICA-RUSSIA RELATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRICS: A STRATEGIC NEXUS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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ABSTRACT

South Africa and Russia have witnessed significant transformation in their relations especially within the framework of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The very existence of both nations within this strategic grouping reflects their shared commitment towards disrupting the status quo, i.e. the dominance of the global affairs and institutions by the Western powers and forging ahead towards a shared commitment to reshape the global governance in a multipolar world order. South Africa has occupied a unique position within BRICS; it is the youngest member of the grouping, and has leveraged its geopolitical influence in the African continent and simultaneously has not shied away from aligning with Russia on critical global issues. This paper traces the evolution of South Africa – Russia relations, their intertwining and collaborative efforts within the BRICS framework that has challenged the paradigms of economic and political governance of the West. The paper will also highlight how BRICS as a platform has advanced South Africa and Russia's economic cooperation, especially in sectors like energy and trade. It will also look into cooperation on climate change and how both countries have valued in expanding the intra-BRICS trade and investment vis-à-vis sectors like defence and mining. Their support to New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) in reducing dependency on financial institutions will also be investigated.

The study will also focus on how the partnership between both countries will carve out broader implications for the regional and global dynamics. While South Africa acts as a gateway to African markets for Russia, Russia's geopolitical clout helps South Africa to align itself with one of the most powerful states in the world. The relationship is not bereft with challenges though, as both countries have divergent domestic policies and Russia is embroiled in its war with the West. Finally, the paper will seek to situate South Africa – Russia relations within the context of BRICS for their shared vision of a better equitable global order, where their partnership and BRICS as a platform aims for global rebalancing and sustainable development.

Keywords: South Africa-Russia Relations, BRICS, Multipolar World, South-South Cooperation, Global Governance, New Development Bank (NDB), Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), Energy Security, Trade Imbalances

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF BRICS IN GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS

In the last two decades one group that has come to the fore in creating a counterweight to the Western groups and their dominance in the global institutions, is the BRICS or a group formed by countries like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. BRICS is a group of emerging economies that was informally formed to arrest or increase their clout in the global affairs. A group to counterbalance the dominance of Western powers imposing their hegemony over the international institutions; however, these institutions were perpetually ignoring the issues and challenges of the developing or emerging economies. BRICS aimed to fulfil the gap caused by the overindulgence of the Western powers in either in their own affairs or ignoring the affairs of the developing world. The primary aim of BRICS was finding a solution to their development challenges, through coordinated economic and diplomatic policies, form new financial institutions and reduce their dependence on the West and their financial institutions.

The emergence of BRICS as an international grouping of nations or an association of developing countries, though, in no way, can be considered as an organization aiming to topple the existing world order. It is rather a reflection of the shift of power from the north to the south, especially on economic aspects (Li 2019). Nevertheless, the geopolitical aspects of the BRICS cannot be ignored, this includes the economic aspects and reform efforts towards addressing the imbalances in the global financial system.

Several new institutions like New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) have been established, that act as alternatives to West led institutions like IMF and World Bank. The primary aim of these institutions is helping member states fund crucial infrastructure projects and provide access to liquidity support during crises, thus enabling the reduction of dependence on the US dollar or support of the West (Bello 2014). Another important economic aspect of the BRICS is the promotion of intra-group trade via local currencies, however, factors like economic disparities between members has become a hindrance to this development. At one end we can see the dominance of China in almost all global spheres, then there is also the focus of countries of South Africa and Brazil, that give priority of their regional or domestic affairs, that may diverge from the broader objectives of the BRICS.

The evolution of BRICS since 2010's has a reflected varied character. This can be seen in the behavioural patterns of the member states in their bilateral relations with each other, the domestic upheavals within or their relations with other countries of the world, some of these patterns have, if not all, affected the growth and evolution of BRICS. P. Bond reflects on these patterns and cites the various external and internal churnings vis-à-vis BRICS and discusses whether these have affected the BRICS or have the BRICS nations overcome these churnings in building better relations with each other. As per Bond BRICS as an international group has reflected centrifugal patterns of global, wherein it has failed to rebalance and provide good governance to the world. Bond says that a resurgent imperialism is being facilitated by BRICS politics around the world. He gives three arguments for these, first he writes, BRICS countries are showing capitalist crisis tendencies because of these centrifugal patterns. Second, finance, trade and climate politics are being dominated by neo-liberal character, through multilateral institutions, primarily in areas like climate politics, finance and trade. Third, Bond has equated BRICS based corporations as forces acting as super-exploitative accumulators reflecting sub- imperial tendencies (Bond 2018).

Despite the above criticism, BRICS isn't just a platform to access or exercise economics between the member states, it is also a platform where the member states have leveraged the membership of BRICS to understate or overstate their geopolitical move. For example, in the case of Russia, it has used the BRICS as a platform to counterbalance Western sanctions imposed on it due the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Similarly, China has used the platform of BRICS to attract other nations towards its Belt and Road project and to underscore its role within BRICS, however, India is overly cautious and concerned of its unresolved border issues.

Thus, BRICS has evolved as a forum that leads the nations of the Global South, which specifically advocates for poverty alleviation, sustainable development and climate justice. It has been able spread its message across continents like Africa and Latin America, which has helped it to address shared challenges of the developing countries together. South Africa and Russia's relations within the BRICS framework has garnered significant interest in the last few years as far as bilateral relations within BRICS is concerned, and a certain section of scholarship has tried to understand this phenomenon.

2. SOUTH AFRICA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

The relations between South Africa and Russia can be traced back to the days of Cold War period wherein Soviet Union was in staunch opposition to the Apartheid in South Africa and supported the cause of anti-colonial movements and liberation of subjugated nations by the colonial powers. The relations between the countries witnessed only after the Cold War ended in 1991, and both countries played it to the geopolitical dynamics and mutual economic, political and military cooperation to improve their relations.

The apartheid era sowed the seeds of a strong bond between the two nations as the Soviet Union became a strong supporter of the African National Congress (ANC) and its fight against the apartheid regime. The Soviet Union gave the ANC material and ideological backing. The bond was so strong that, the ANC cadres, especially the ones belonging to the armed wing *Umkhonto we Sizwe* got special military training from the Soviet forces (Shubin 2008). The approach of the Soviet Union towards South Africa, especially the ANC in the broader Cold War context is considered as a counterbalance approach to check Western influence in Africa. However, the apartheid regime in South Africa that was dominated by

white Europeans allied with the Western powers like the US and Britain, clearly reflected their strategic ideological opposition to the influence of communism. The end of apartheid and the end of Cold War coincided and South Africa - Russia relations witnessed a new dawn since 1994 (Alden 2001).

It was only after the end of apartheid in South Africa and the end of the Cold War wherein the Soviet Union disintegrated and Russia inherited the legacy of the Soviet Union's support for the anti-apartheid movement. In the aftermath of the end of the apartheid, the ANC led government under the then leadership of Nelson Mandela, recognized South Africa as a historical ally, and diplomatic ties between the two countries was formalized in 1992 (Shubin 2008). In the present times South Africa - Russia relations is the result of the historical aspects as discussed above and also due to factors like South Africa Russia's presence in multilateral platforms such as BRICS that has bolstered their economic and political ties (Bond 2014). The key area of collaboration between the two countries has been energy, especially the nuclear power. This is evident from the fact that Russian state corporation Rosatom has been actively involved in developing South African nuclear energy projects (Korngay 2013).

It has to be noted that pre-1990 or the Cold War period relations between the two nations was driven by ideals and ideology, the period after that was characterized primarily by pragmatism. In this pragmatism economic considerations played a crucial role in strengthening the diplomatic ties between the two nations. The abundance of natural resources that both countries endowed and Russia's ambitions of capital investments in South Africa, defence deals with it during its economic downslide then, were some other reasons for a strong foundations of good relations between them (Sidiropoulos, Alden 2019:28).

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos and Chris Alden have explained the post-Cold War relations between the countries in four stages. As per the Authors, Russia-South Africa relationship has evolved through four stages that has been characterized by evolving political, economic, and strategic dynamics. The first stage in the 1990s witnessed the resumption of diplomatic ties and agreements like the 1993 trade treaty and a 1995 military cooperation agreement, however, there was some trace of superficiality in the ties, as the remnants of apartheid era associations carried a historical baggage. The second stage began by state visits to Russia first by the deputy president Thabo Mbeki (1998) and second by then president Nelson Mandela (1999), and these visits coincided with Russia's multi-vector foreign policy. Several Agreements were signed by both countries on capital investments, defence cooperation, taxation, and regular ministerial meetings, collaborations on global issues like disarmament and terrorism were also added to list. In 2006, Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to South Africa heralded a new era of political engagement, business ties and joint space technology collaboration between the two countries. The third stage began in 2010 under the leadership of then president Jacob Zuma who is credited to have pushed South Africa's membership of BRICS, this initiative by Zuma diversified South Africa's global partnerships. The period witnessed increased political exchanges and comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia in 2013, especially in sectors like agriculture and space technology in 2013. This period saw some limitations on the economic ties and a R1.6 trillion (South African Rands) nuclear energy deal with Russia under Jacob Zuma in this period witnessed significant domestic criticism. The fourth and final stage begin with Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency in 2018, indicating some thaw in relations between South Africa and Russia. In 2018 President Putin's planned state visit to South Africa was withdrawn and only to be replaced by President Xi Jinping of China, and the nuclear project was shelved during this period, casting a shadow especially by political symbolism on practical outcomes (ibid. 2019:29-31).

3. THE ROLE OF BRICS IN SHAPING SOUTH AFRICA-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIP

The BRICS grouping has played a significant role in influencing contemporary South Africa-Russia relations by enhancing closer political, economic, and strategic relations between the two nations. In 2010, South African president Jacob Zuma initiated a strategic move by pushing the South African membership to BRICS, and this move opened the options of diversifying South Africa's global partnerships, breaking a trend of relying on traditional partnerships with Europe and the US. Europe and US were also facing the challenges of the then financial crisis, and South Africa's inclusion in BRICS provided an opportunity for BRICS nations to expand their geographical outreach to the African continent. Hence, for Russia too it was an opportunity, to reach out the African continent and enhance its global standing. Thus, BRICS provided a platform to both countries to expand and enhance partnerships in key global issues like UN reform, climate change and economic development. The platform of BRICS provided both countries to align their positions in other multilateral forums like the UNSC and the G20 (Kornegay & Bohler-Muller, 2013).

The BRICS platform also provided Russia an increased visibility in South Africa as traditionally it had focussed on economic ties with China, India and Brazil. BRICS summits annually provided frequent exchanges between South African and Russian leaders, that most often culminated in agreements in multiple sectors like, defence, energy and space technology. For example, in 2013, the BRICS framework actively supported South Africa's negotiation of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia that aimed at deepening cooperation across multiple fields, including nuclear energy (Mthembu, 2018). However, some agreements like the nuclear deal attracted controversy during Jacob Zuma presidency and with domestic pressures the deal had to be halted during the presidency of Cyril Ramaphosa, exposing the complexity in their relationship (Sidiropoulos, 2019).

The BRICS platform also provided both countries a platform to critique and counter the West-dominated global financial and governance systems. Both South Africa and Russia advocate for a multipolar world order, collaborating on initiatives spanning BRICS New Development Bank, helping with alternate financing to emerging economies (Shubin & Sanders, 2017).

4. ECONOMIC COOPERATION: ENERGY, TRADE, AND INVESTMENT

Notwithstanding the various merits of the BRICS as a platform for both nations, the economic relations between South Africa and Russia haven't had the success that was expected from both countries leadership. The numbers in trade volumes are modest and cooperation under BRICS has been unable to resolve the underlying imbalances in the economic partnership between the two countries. The grouping BRICS has rather been more pronounced in enhancing symbolic and political ties between the two nations which reflect their shared aspirations for greater influence in global affairs.

Economic cooperation between South Africa-Russia extends across important industries such as energy, trade, defence, and mining, reflecting both countries' strategic interests. Nuclear cooperation has been a key issue in energy policy, particularly under Jacob Zuma's presidency, when South Africa signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Russia in 2014 to develop eight nuclear power stations. Though it was terminated due to financial and regulatory issues, the project reflected Russia's desire to establish a nuclear footprint in South Africa (Sidiropoulos, 2019). Renewable energy projects and energy-efficiency technology transfers are other examples of collaborative endeavours.

Russia and South Africa have also given importance to mining and defence. Russia being a global leader in mining technology, provides South Africa with experience and tools in order to modernize its mining industry. Joint ventures on Platinum and other rare mineral explain a shared desire between the two nations to capitalize on mineral wealth (Shubin & Sanders, 2017). As far as defence sector is concerned Russia has provided South African military with equipment and training, thus strengthening their ties further. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2013 formalized cooperation in several industries, ensuring long-term engagement.

The complex trade relations can be explained from the 2022 trade data between the two nations. For example, Russia shipped \$548 million worth of commodities to South Africa, notably mixed mineral or chemical fertilisers (\$140 million), nitrogenous fertilisers (\$85.6 million), and copper wire (\$70 million). Exports increased steadily at an annualized rate of 9.59%, up from \$347 million in 2017. In addition, Russia provided South Africa with \$18.9 million in services in 2020, with transportation (\$5.81 million), royalties and license fees (\$5.64 million), and other business services (\$3.36 million) accounting for the majority. South Africa sold \$283 million in goods to Russia in 2022, with the top products being citrus (\$138 million), apples and pears (\$61.4 million), and other nuts (\$13.2 million). However, South African exports to Russia have declined by 10.7% each year over the last five years, from \$498 million in 2017. Notably, South Africa didn't export any services to Russia in 2022. In comparison, Russia is more economically complex and exports more overall. In 2022, Russia ranked 47th on the Economic Complexity Index (ECI 0.43) and 12th globally in total exports (\$486B), while South Africa rated 59th on the ECI (0.076) and 34th in total exports (\$147B). This trade imbalance demonstrates Russia's growing export footprint in South Africa while South African exports to Russia are shrinking, emphasizing asymmetrical trade relations (OEC. World 2022).

Overall, the economic relationship has potential, but structural imbalances and little diversity in trade and investment provide obstacles. Addressing these difficulties could lead to greater collaboration, particularly in the sustainable energy and high-tech industries. BRICS has been instrumental in strengthening South Africa-Russia relations by providing a strategic framework for collaboration on global issues and deepening political exchanges. However, its impact on economic ties has been limited, underscoring the challenges of translating political alignment into substantive economic outcomes.

5. COLLABORATION ON GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

There are numerous ways wherein South Africa and Russia have worked together within the BRICS platform to develop a more inclusive and multipolar global governance system. Some of the most prominent ones are the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). The NDB is specifically an alternative to Western model institutions such as the World Bank, and is intended to bridge the infrastructure finance gap in poor and developing countries. Both South Africa and Russia have supported the bank's objectives that are in line with sustainable development. While South Africa has leveraged significantly from the NDB by funding the renewable energy projects and infrastructure development, Russia too has benefited by utilizing the institutions to expand its foreign economic partnerships and assist infrastructure investments in member countries (BRICS Joint Statement 2014).

The CRA acts as a support system for the NDB by acting as a financial safety net for the BRICS countries in times of crises. Its short-term cash support and reduced reliance on organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), reflects its readiness for any contingency. Its \$100 billion pooled reserve amount is an example of its resilience and intent to keep financial shocks to world economy at bay. While Russia views the CRA as a weapon to offset Western financial pressures, especially in the context of sanctions, South Africa views it as an extra cushion during times of currency volatility (Shubin & Sanders, 2017). Russia and South Africa show their common commitment to enabling developing countries and reforming international financial institutions through the NDB and CRA. These institutions represent a larger BRICS agenda to change the global power structure and promote collaboration on sustainable development and governance changes. The partnership shows the possibility of closer financial and governance linkages, even though there are still obstacles in the way of these organisations' impact growing.

6. JOINT EFFORTS ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

South Africa and Russia work together on sustainable development and climate change in both bilateral and global arenas, especially within BRICS. As significant resource-based economies with urgent domestic development demands, both nations stress the need for fair global climate policies that strike a balance between environmental preservation and socioeconomic advancement (BRICS Environment Ministers Statement, 2021). Under the BRICS framework, South Africa and Russia have frequently collaborated on climate change and sustainable development, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Their mutual promotion of equitable climate action and shared views on holding the industrialized nations for past emissions has strengthened the idea of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (Bond, 2020; Sidiropoulos, 2019). Both countries rely on their mutual reliance on resource-intensive industries and share the socioeconomic difficulties associated with the shift to greener economies.

South Africa faces acute climate challenges, like droughts and water scarcity; this necessitates renewable energy efforts and sustainable resource management (Chaka, 2021). On the other end Russia has been prioritising on cutting emissions and improving forest carbon sequestration, in order to promote global climatic stability, as it reduces vulnerability (Kutovoy, 2020). South Africa and Russia's mutual support to greater climate financing and technology transfer too provide boost to sustainable development in the global south aligns with the aims of BRICS discussions (Shubin & Sanders, 2017). Notwithstanding the advancements of these efforts between the two countries, there still exist problems, insufficient funding and lack of coordination during execution of specific emission reduction plans. However, the collaborative efforts between South Africa and Russia have demonstrated dedication and coordination towards national interests with international sustainability objectives.

7. CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The pursuit of common goals with common platforms like BRICS has not made both South Africa and Russia immune from the challenges plaguing their relations. Primary among them are the disparate domestic objectives and the consequences of Russia's war with the west. While South Africa is democratic and constitutional republic, Russia has a centralized governance model, with power and authority confined to one man or party. This leads to complicating the deeper political convergence. South Africa's economic policies are mainly targeting resolving the issues of inequality and sustainable development, whereas, Russia's energy driven economy has been prioritising on geopolitical objectives. This may lead to conflict in various cooperation sectors. The circumstances have worsened especially after the Russia-West

conflict since the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine in 2014. Russia is under a barrage of sanctions from the Western countries, especially the EU and the US, this has complicated the situation for South Africa, as at one end it is balancing its foreign policy and at the other end it is in dire pressure from the West to cut off ties with Russia (Van der Westhuizen, 2021).

While South Africa has refrained from siding with either the West or Russia, its domestic stakeholders and the West have criticised it for its alleged support of Russia in multilateral forums like BRICS (Alden & Schoeman, 2015). There are economic relations imbalances too between the two countries; while Russia exports more goods to South Africa, its imports have reduced, this has limited the benefits of economic cooperation between the two (Chaka, 2021). In addition to this, considering the geopolitical pressures, South Africa is cautious of strengthening its relations with Russia as it relies on Western markets (Gelb, 2020).

Despite these challenges both South Africa and Russia are continuously working to build their relations via shared interests like multilateral participation and energy cooperation. However, to build resilience and long-term partnerships, both nations need to re-evaluate their alliance considering the perpetual geopolitical upheavals.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS

The expanding geopolitical clout of Russia and the primary position of South Africa in the African continent are significant to their bilateral and regional interactions. South Africa has enjoyed a geographically advantageous position as it is located in the southern most region of the African continent, a region that witnesses primary access of international markets. It is the main gateway for foreign investments into Africa, especially in industries like infrastructure, energy, and mining (Adebajo, 2020; Hough, 2016). South Africa strengthens its geopolitical standing as a BRICS member, giving Russia a powerful ally in the Southern Hemisphere. Utilising its established diplomatic connections and commercial prowess on the continent, South Africa is seen by Russia as crucial to extending its political and economic influence in Africa (Harsch, 2020; Makarova, 2019).

Furthermore, given Russia's evolving global aspirations—particularly as it seeks to offset Western domination—South Africa's membership in BRICS places it in a key position. Through South Africa, the connection allows Russia to interact with African countries, particularly in areas such as energy, defence, and technology cooperation (Parker, 2020). With South Africa serving as a link to the rest of the region, this partnership helps Russia increase its influence over political and economic issues in Africa (Odusanya, 2019). South Africa's position is not without difficulties, though. Careful diplomatic manoeuvring is necessary to maintain a balance between its relations with Russia and its Western friends. Furthermore, although South Africa serves as a regional gateway for Russia, the wider geopolitical difficulties, particularly Russia's continuous battle with the West, may make relations with African countries more difficult, as many of them favour neutrality and non-alignment (Hough, 2016; Parker, 2020).

9. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the future of the South Africa-Russia alliance inside BRICS offers a challenging but potentially significant partnership that unites both countries with a common goal of a multipolar global order. Being a major entry point into Africa, South Africa is strategically important to Russia since it gives it access to new markets and increases its power there. Given its prior reliance on Western powers, South Africa's participation in the BRICS framework with Russia enables it to diversify its diplomatic and economic ties. Their cooperation within BRICS is firmly based on their shared ambition to overthrow the current international power structures, which have traditionally been dominated by Western nations.

Notwithstanding these synergies, there exist many obstacles that could affect the South Africa-Russian alliance. Both countries have to balance their approach of having good relations with Western powers and being united within the BRICS framework. Russia has been involved in a prolonged conflict with the West, due to its invasion of Ukraine and increased tensions with the NATO. Whereas, South African foreign policy has traditionally been on having cordial relations with the Western nations, especially on aspects like human rights and democracy. Thus, it becomes pertinent to understand the domestic ramifications of the geopolitical upheavals. However, South Africa's close association with Russia may irk the Western nations and its say on major global issues, and advocacy at the UN may get affected with this closeness.

Further, both countries are making efforts to reform the world, however, this united stand has not been able to convert to the economic exchange front. Trade relations between South Africa and Russia may be expanding, however, it cannot be compared to what South Africa's trade relations are with China and other BRICS nations like India and Brazil. Some of the major challenges that have come on the way of deeper economic cooperation between the two countries include, shifting global commodity prices, infrastructure constraints and political unpredictability. Industry sectors that have shown some positive sign are mining, energy and defence. Being a crucial allies of each other and furthering their strategic objectives in Africa, both countries need to resolve their respective domestic issues in resolving regional complexities. As it is these complexities that affect the outcome of their mutual political and economic interactions.

In addition to this, the BRICS too is a platform that laden with conflicting dynamics affecting both nations aspiration of a multipolar world order. This aspiration of a multipolar world order may be limited by other dynamics within BRICS, like China and India's ascent as two major powers in Asia. Both South Africa and Russia need to negotiate the rise of these two Asian powers and be aligned with them for a better geopolitical standing. South Africa's approach in international affairs is more conservative and practical, whereas, Russia displays a muscular and aggressive foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis Europe and Middle East. This may lead to occasional frictions in their approach on certain global issues.

As far as BRICS as a platform for both countries is concerned, it has a lot of promise, however their relations within BRICS too demands constant communication and adjustments to the dynamics of geopolitical environment. Some of the other issues and challenges both nations have to endure for greater collaboration and partnership are; internal political challenges, negotiating relations with other major global powers, and pursue varied political and economic ties. These efforts will provide a better picture of the longevity of their relations. If South Africa and Russia are able to accomplish in addressing the aforementioned issues and challenges, then their common goal of furthering the BRICS' multipolar world order, endorsing a diversified and equitable international system will be achieved.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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