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Africanising the BRICS Agenda: Indications from Durban

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SIPHAMANDLA ZONDI, MAR 26 2013

South Africa, the newest member of the BRICS platform, has gone to great lengths selling the next Summit in Durban, South Africa, as an African summit. This does not just mean that the BRICS summit will be on the African continent for the first time, which is itself significant in its own right, but it is also about the agenda that South Africa has for its membership in BRICS, namely: constructing a convergence in the interests of the global south with those of South Africa and Africa. This complex undertaking comes from the fact that it perceives itself as a bridge-builder between various layers of the global geopolitical order. This role is also seen as one of the ways towards a new world order that places the interests of Africa and the south at the centre.

The Summit in Durban makes a strong promise of placing Africa at the centre of the BRICS' cooperation with Africa. But this will need a strong alignment of national interests of BRICS countries around the importance of an enlightened relationship with Africa.

Africa and the BRICS

The growing relationship between the BRICS platform and the African continent is driven by a number of factors. Key among these is the fact that key national interests of each of the BRICS countries converge in and on Africa. But whether this convergence is being harnessed strategically to deepen BRICS' role in creating conditions for Africa to arise is a subject for debate. I say this because unless Africa's strategic needs are mainstreamed into the national interests of each BRICS state, the platform's commitment to Africa would be difficult to translate into action for the platform does not have a secretariat or a common institutional machinery for executing "platform decisions", but it implements what it decides through the actions of each state primarily and through informal ministerial committees that it establishes from time to time.

Each of the BRICS states have significantly increased their investments, trade and developmental cooperation on the continent in the past decade. Brazil has in the past two decades rejuvenated its age-old relations with Africa, taking advantage of cultural and ideological affinity. A recent World Bank Study found that Brazil's trade with Africa increased from US\$2 billion to US\$12 billion between 2000 and 2010. Brazilian investment in the construction, agriculture, medical, and energy industries dominate this trade. It has spent hundreds of millions in dollar terms stimulating the expansion of its businesses in Africa. It has revised its Africa strategy in order to allow for even stronger and deeper relations and cooperation. It has also increased the size of its diplomatic service serving Africa and the number of state-owned enterprises driving its economic diplomacy on the continent.

India has a very long history of engagement with Africa, one that can be traced back to ancient trade across the Indian Ocean in the first century CE. It expanded again during the colonial period and after India's independence. The establishment of the India-Africa Forum in April 2008 was to formalize economic and political relations that had matured in many ways. Its trade increased from US\$3 billion to US\$52.81 billion between 2000 and 2010, making India the fourth largest trade partner after the EU, China and the US. Its investments are now estimated at close to US\$35 billion and the focus of this is on agriculture, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals and energy. With 50 diplomatic missions in Africa, India's diplomatic presence there is larger than that of even South Africa. There are

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about 60 major Indian companies doing business in Africa and they are spread across a wide range of economic sectors. India's aid to Africa has also been on the increase with a focus on institution-building, training and support towards the achievement of MDGs.

Russia's relations with Africa have a history of just over three centuries. In more recent times, relations were punctuated by the conditions of the Cold War where a number of African countries benefitted from the Soviet Union that Russia led, but others aligned themselves with the west. After the Cold War, Russia became a regional power and grew closer to the developing world and Africa over shared interests in reforming the unjust western-dominated world order. It has taken concrete steps to harness this relationship. But it was also responding to a sort of crisis of identity and a clash of political culture with the west. It is using the history of political solidarity to gain access to Africa's huge market for industries like construction and infrastructure, gas and oil exploration, and rare mineral resources. In the process, the size of Russia's trade with Africa increased tenfold from US\$ 740 million in 1994 to about US\$7.7 billion by 2010.

China is also not new on the African continent with economic relations stretching back to 200 BC. They intensified to new levels from the late 1950s through to the 1980s and surged up significantly again from the 1990s. As the Chinese economic reforms and strong growth happened in the 1980s, its trade with Africa also grew. For instance, in 1980, the Sino-Africa trade amounted to US\$1 billion, growing ten times to US\$10 billion by 2000. In the decade to 2010, it went up ten times again to US\$114 billion. Thus, China overtook former colonial powers that had dominated Africa's trade relations in the past decade. The bulk of this trade is in oil and energy, construction and infrastructure, agriculture, transport and communications, mineral resource and banking sectors of the economy. The existence of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation provides an institutional basis for the deepening of the economic relations as it enables China to negotiate its strategic and long-term interests and aligning them with those of 54 African states through a process of dialogue and partnership. China has not just forgiven US\$30 billion worth of debt owed by 35 African countries, but has invested several billions in official development assistance between 2000 and 2010.

South Africa is an African country that did not have a formal and friendly relationship with the rest of the continent during colonialism and apartheid, a period ending in 1994 when apartheid ended. On the contrary, the liberation movements, especially the ANC, had embraced Africa from the beginning of the 20th century and established themselves as a *de facto* alternative government representing the peoples of South Africa in continental politics and diplomacy. Since the liberation of a special kind in the form of a negotiated settlement and the first democratic elections in April 1994, relations with Africa grew remarkably, building on the ANC's extensive diplomatic footprint on the continent. Its business sector also followed suit expanding to all parts of the continent. The volume of trade amounted to US\$7.3 billion in 2000 growing to just over just over US\$31 billion by 2010/11. By 2008, it had 45 diplomatic missions in Africa, up from just 17 in 1994. The country also worked with other major African states to strengthen continental institutions for peace and development and in redefining Africa's external relations. It has invested handsomely into capacity building, post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian assistance on the continent.

But these relations are problematic. They are complex in many ways. BRICS countries and Africa are yet to clearly distinguish their intentions from the economic relations-driven western powers, beyond a language that understands historical injustices, structural inequalities and the demon of exploitation. The balance of trade is skewed to Africa's disadvantage and the bulk of new trade remains in extraction of Africa's natural resources and other primary commodities, thus perpetuating the old colonial economic logic by which Africa became the source of cheap raw materials and labour. Many a time, the companies from BRICS countries are fingered for exploitative behaviour including the payment of slave wages, the neglect of working conditions of the workers, the neglect of the environment and even land grab. They generally operate like most commercial enterprises motivated by profit and shareholder compacts just as are western multinationals. While state-owned entities show some restraint, they too pursue profit and the logic of the capitalist enterprise, which leads to exploitation of labour and the pillaging of precious natural resources.

So, now that the BRICS position in Durban is a foregone conclusion, we should expect the BRICS to show concretely how it will deepen relations with Africa especially in the areas of industrialization, integration and development. Until

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then, the BRICS promise to be sensitive to the African agenda will ring as hollow as the G8's lip service to Africa, the now abandoned G8 Africa Plan. South Africa will benefit immensely from a successful BRICS-Africa agenda, but it might pay dearly if this turns out to be a flop. That is the danger of bridge-building.

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Siphamandla Zondi *is the director of the **Institute for Global Dialogue** and an honorary professor of politics and development studies at the University of South Africa.*

About the author:

Dr Siphamandla Zondi is the director of Institute for Global Dialogue and an honorary professor of politics and development studies at the University of South Africa. He graduated with MPhil in African History and DPhil in African Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK. He serves on Boards of the Africa Institute, the Archie Mafeje Institute at UNISA, the Action Aid –South Africa and in 2011 he was the chair of the AU Technical Committee of Experts on Sudan.