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Post 2024 BRICS as a maritime player: A space for Africa?¹

Background

By 2024 the BRICS grouping of countries grew to 9 member states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, alongside Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, the UAE) with Saudi Arabia not accepting full membership. After the 2024 Summit meeting in Kazan Russia, no new members were invited but several countries now enjoy [partnership status](#). The latter includes coastal states such as Algeria, Cuba, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Türkiye and Vietnam. Irrespective of the kind of membership they enjoy, BRICS now reflects a state grouping with a maritime footprint from the Atlantic, into the Mediterranean, Black Sea, to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, Arctic Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. For Africa this is important as their BRICS affiliated countries hold real potential to also latch their own interests to another international grouping.

Work on BRICS as a maritime actor is characterised by temporal and spatial gaps in its current format. This research brief therefore explores the maritime dimension of a post-2024 BRICS and how African countries within the grouping—whether as members, partners, or affiliates—might leverage these affiliations for economic, security, and developmental benefits. Specifically, it points out potential pathways for BRICS to pursue maritime interests along integrationist, dispersed and diffused pathways and points out benefits for African members and partner countries.

Discussion

The extent to which BRICS becomes a maritime player is latent for now, but the collective potential of individual countries, their geographic locations and maritime interests they wish to pursue are real. At the moment BRICS features as a loosely organised grouping operating as [a club rallying around ideas](#), not an integrated body of member states cooperating closely for economic clout, an alternative pole in a multipolar world and an attraction for promoting agendas of the Global South. Within its Summit Declarations since

2010 when South Africa joined, one finds little concern with maritime interests, cooperation and programmes under the BRICS banner. In contrast, the most visible maritime face of BRICS stems from a growing number of bi- and trilateral naval exercises between BRICS member states, but not officially connected to any BRICS arrangement or alliance.² It remains to be seen if these naval exercises are expanded as new member states or partners join the BRICS family. Irrespective of how BRICS grows its membership and partner profiles, it already reflects a maritime profile holding exciting potential for oceans use. The question is how BRICS can harness this potential in pursuit of its annual statements of intent.

The geographically dispersed membership of BRICS complicates the pursuit of a common maritime security agenda. Given the economic, developmental and cooperation narratives directing [annual BRICS Summit meetings](#), one can well ask how tenable it is to achieve its ambitions while neglecting a maritime agenda as the global economy and any BRICS stake in it are maritime based. Moving along an integration continuum from club to union is one pathway, albeit a difficult and time-consuming one. Another avenue is dispersed regionalism where member states agree to pursue and promote common BRICS maritime objectives in their respective regions that allows leeway to tie in their own national maritime interests. A third alternative is diffusing BRICS maritime interests and agendas into the [multiple working groups and theme-driven bodies](#) that make up the engine rooms for operationalising BRICS agendas and decisions. This is a difficult option and very low-keyed depicting a fractured concern with maritime matters and its security underpinnings.

As more African countries (coastal and landlocked) join BRICS, or become [partners, or fully or partially associate themselves with BRICS](#), they are also exposed to the extent to which BRICS pursues a maritime agenda along integrated, dispersed or diffused pathways. The integrated approach implies that African coastal countries must conform to a BRICS block agenda that suits or partially overlaps with their own interests. A dispersed approach offers more leeway for African countries to get the best of both worlds through their formal or informal BRICS affiliations and escape the dilemma of subjecting national to block interests. Inherently, every BRICS member or partner also has its own reasons for joining or being affiliated with BRICS and this is no different for their maritime interests. As such, South Africa’s Operation Phakisa, Nigeria’s Deep Blue Project, Egypt’s National Strategy for the Blue Economy and Algeria’s National Strategy for the Blue Economy in Algeria – SNEB 2030 all remain in the picture and stand to benefit from associated BRICS projects and programmes. The diffusion option implies African countries must select which maritime areas of interest they wish to pursue within the BRICS ensemble of [working groups and committees](#). Either way, BRICS affiliated African countries harbour security, economic, environmental and development ambitions tied to the use of the oceans and possible to pursue by working with other BRICS countries through either of the three options mentioned and illustrated below.

Table 1: Alternative pathways to a BRICS maritime agenda

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| <p>Integrationist pathway</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Club (Loosely organised) Discuss maritime interests and ocean risks • Political alliance (Expanding membership) Influence maritime agendas • More integration (Union ambitions) Responsible and productive ocean use • Globalist (Beyond BRICS) Block player Trusted maritime security provider • Economic alliance (should be attractive for expanded membership) Influence fishing and other maritime resources and all the |
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² See for example Sea Security Belt (2024), Northern United (2024), Marine Security Belt (2023), Milan (2024), IBSAMAR VIII (2024) and Mosi II (2023).

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| | sustainability agendas) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A potential defence Alliance |
| Dispersed regionalism by partnering with other BRICS members and partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East African Hub (South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia) • Red Sea Hub (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) • Gulf of Guinea/Atlantic Hub (Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba) • Mediterranean Hub (Algeria, Egypt, Türkiye) • Indian Ocean Rim (RSA, India, Ethiopia) |
| Diffusionist by tying up with BRICS working groups and their programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green economy & energy • Science & technology • Digital economy • Manufacturing & infrastructure • Food and security • Trade & investment |

The above three pathways each have advantages and disadvantages. The integrationist approach implies that BRICS countries all buy in, and stronger members assist weaker members are, but this is a long route to full integration with incremental maritime advantages for all over time. It does however fall into step with a longer agenda such as AIMS-2050. The dispersal option implies a better regional focus that broadly conforms with the African regional communities but brings together players like Egypt and Ethiopia that are caught up in rivalries while Türkiye and Egypt in the same grouping might also be problematic. Overall, the dispersal option speaks to the idea of better regional maritime security in the continent’s littoral waters and thus for BRICS. The diffusion option offers selective maritime participation for national interests, but this sidelines an African agenda, and stronger partners will probably dictate the agenda. In essence however the diffusion option leans more towards the use of the oceans and less so towards maintaining good order at sea that is better catered for by the integrationist and dispersal alternatives.

Synopsis and summary

BRICS continues to attract membership interests from across the globe with African countries featuring in both the attraction and membership profiles. Turning to the maritime angle, the most visible face of maritime cooperation is naval in kind, but not based in any official BRICS security or military cooperation agreements – a matter still clearly avoided in the stated cooperation narratives of BRICS. In contrast to the naval exercises, official indicators of BRICS maritime cooperation remain low-keyed, and declaratory with the [2018 Johannesburg Declaration](#) still the most explicit call on record. Upon closer scrutiny, one finds a scattered vague overall picture of a BRICS maritime agenda despite a footprint in almost all oceans with each coastal member state harbouring its own maritime ambitions premised upon the use and protection of the oceans as a stock and flow resource.

While the annual themes of BRICS Summits since 2010 place persistent emphasis on partnerships, development, collaboration, growth and multilateralism – all being fundamental to using the oceans in a cooperative, responsible and multilateral manner for developmental and growth agendas – BRICS maritime ambitions remain very low-keyed. Turning to Africa, six African countries are members or partners of BRICS of which four are coastal states: Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa. BRICS’s African members and partners dominate strategic straits and ocean routes, enjoy proximity to offshore energy hubs and feature as dominant regional powers in North, West and Southern Africa.

This leaves the question how BRICS can harness this maritime potential in future? Three alternative ways are proposed. First, an integrated and coercive block body under the BRICS banner. Second, a cooperative approach by using the dispersed regional nature of BRICS to pursue maritime security governance and

responsible oceans use in the regions where its member states and partners are located. Third, going for a diffused approach that allows member states to connect their maritime interests and programmes to the multiple working groups responsible to execute BRICS summit decisions through agreements and programmes.

Further Reading: Konyshov, V. and Sergunin, A., 2022. Theoretical Perspectives on BRICS: What Kind of an International Institution Is It?. In *Turning Points of World Transformation: New Trends, Challenges and Actors* (pp. 101-115). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

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