


P O L I C Y B R I E F

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The BRICS Parliamentary Forum as a viable Parliamentary diplomacy Platform: An analysis of the 9th BRICS Parliamentary Forum outcomes

Introduction

Parliamentary diplomacy has been recognised as a catalyst in shaping a more equitable international order and revitalising the multilateral system. Parliamentary diplomacy is an essential part of international cooperation, helping to build bridges between countries and peoples and seeking to contribute a parliamentary perspective to global governance, as well as the promotion of peace (Damen, 2022). Based on the governance principle of chairmanship rotation and as part of its continued efforts to deepen engagement in international fora through parliamentary diplomacy, the South African Parliament assumed 2023 BRICS PF chairmanship. Correspondingly, as per the norm, on September 27-28, 2023, the South African Parliament successfully hosted the 9th Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) Parliamentary Forum (BPF) in Gauteng, South Africa, from under the theme, 'Harnessing multilateralism and parliamentary diplomacy to deepen BRICS and Africa Partnership for accelerated implementation of the Africa Continental Free-Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)'.

The thematic focus of the 9th BRICS PF was aligned to the 2023 SA BRICS Chairmanship's overarching theme, which was 'BRICS and Africa Partnership'. This did not only reaffirm the centrality of the African continent to South Africa's foreign policy and economic diplomacy, but it also gave meaning to the policy position that the country's national interests are 'intrinsically linked to Africa's stability, unity, and prosperity'. Moreover, creating synergies between the 15th BRICS Summit and the 9th BRICS PF themes also ensured that there is continuity and consistence in the work of BRICS going into the future (South African Parliament, 2023).

The BPF was attended by many dignitaries including His Excellency, Mr Paul Mashatile, Deputy Vice President, Republic of South Africa, Hon NN Mapisa-Nqakula, Speaker of the National Assembly and Hon AN Maseko, Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Parliament of RSA. Also in attendance were BRICS parliamentarians from all the BRICS countries. A number of the BRICS+ countries were also in attendance, such as HE Dr Hanafy Ali El Gebaly, Speaker of the Egyptian House of Representatives, HE Saqr Ghobash, Speaker of Majlis Watani Itihadi, United Arab Emirates, HE Prof Peter H Katjavivi, Speaker of the National Assembly of Namibia, HE Mr Peng Qinghua, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China.

The Parliamentary Forum embodied a collective aspiration for global peace, equality, and sustainable prosperity. The key parliamentary output was the adoption of the joint declaration statement and the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which marked a significant milestone, reflecting a united vision to strengthen relations, especially with Africa, so as to promote inclusive growth and sustainable development on the continent (South African Parliament, 2023).

The Forum was hosted by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa in partnership with the BRICS Research Centre, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The proposed partnership was aimed at providing a broadened platform for members of the public, elected public representatives, policy makers, public servants, scholars and experts to engage in strategic conversations, sharing of insights and ex-

periences, including drawing of best practices amongst the BRICS countries. This aspect was accomplished through the HSRC assisting with the facilitation of four commissions that are consistent of academics and practitioners.

The four key thematic focus areas for the commissions were:

- BRICS and Africa Partnership: promotion and acceleration of regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)
- BRICS Energy Production: Just Transition from Coal to Hydrogen Energy and Renewable Energy
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- BRICS Peace and Security: Can multilateralism restore peace and security?

The objective of this policy brief, therefore, is to present three of the thematic outcomes and critically assess whether parliamentary diplomacy was harnessed in a more meaningful and impactful way. Parliamentary oversight over the workings and decisions of multilateral organisations, continental and regional bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC) and others, is left mostly to national parliaments, which are supposed to exercise democratic scrutiny over what their national governments are doing at a multilateral level. This begs the question as to whether a multinational parliamentary body, such as the BPF, would be able to establish global legislative measures and implement scrutiny over not just global politics, but the national governments of their members states in the future.

While it is too early to predict the impact of the 2023 BPF as the MoU was only signed on September 28, 2023, one would hope that the outcome of the event will be serving as a starting point. Due to limited space, it is difficult to discuss all four of the thematic. Only three of the thematic are discussed, with the exception of the one on multilateralism, peace and security. Finally, the 9th BPF was hosted before the new members of the BRICS+ were officially admitted in January 2024. Hence, the focus of this discussion will be mainly on the initial five BRICS member states.

Background

Over the years, the BRICS countries have not only shown tremendous determination and co-operation on global issues in recent years, but their alliance epitomises South-South cooperation in the contemporary era (Anwar, 2015). Suffice to say, the PF serves as an important platform that could positively shape global issues related to South-South cooperation from an economic and political developmental perspective.

Pursued properly, BPF multilateral efforts can legislatively position African countries amongst the world's fastest-growing economies by supporting implementation of the African

Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement. Suffice to say, the AfCFTA that serves as a regional tool presents further opportunities for BRICS trade and South-South co-operation. A successful AfCFTA will result in an integrated continent, which will only further strengthen South-South economic cooperation. Regional integration of the continent will have a positive impact on BRICS multilateral efforts. The AfCFTA could actually promote South-South trade as, in the long term, it will provide BRICS companies with additional business opportunities to undertake economic and infrastructure investment projects needed to advance regional trade integration in Africa (Munemo, 2021).

Regional integration and multilateralism are two phenomena that have challenged the pre-existing global order based upon sovereign states since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The two processes deeply affect the stability of the Westphalian state system, which is sometimes abused through unilateralism. The main objective of the 9th BPF was to determine how multilateralism and parliamentary diplomacy can deepen BRICS and African partnership to accelerate implementation of the AfCFTA. There are a lot of other measures that need to be put in place in order for the AfCFTA to be successful. However, due to time, the BPF was only able to host the four aforementioned commissions.

Commission One: BRICS and AfCFTA: How can BRICS promote regional integration through AfCFTA?

The AfCFTA is the world's largest free trade area bringing together the 55 countries of the African Union (AU) and eight (8) Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The overall mandate of the AfCFTA is to create a single continental market with a population of about 1,3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately US\$ 3,4 trillion (African Union, Nd). As part of its mandate, the AfCFTA seeks to eliminate trade barriers and boost intra-Africa trade. In particular, it is also aimed at advancing trade in value-added production across all service sectors of the African Economy. The ultimate goal is that, at the end, the AfCFTA will cumulatively contribute to establishing regional value chains in Africa, enabling investment and job creation.

AfCFTA does have its own challenges, which require the assistance of its aforementioned BRICS trading partners. New estimates by the African Development Bank (AfDB) suggest that the continent's infrastructure needs amount to \$130-170 billion a year, with a financing gap in the range \$68-\$108 billion (African Development Bank, Nd). The transportation infrastructure connecting African countries is weak and it is largely outward-oriented, primarily towards the erstwhile colonies (Goyal, 2022). The road connectivity networks are also fragmented and are inherited from the colonial period. Other connectivity networks, such as railways, are non-existent in the region (Goyal, 2022).

Some of the key questions regarding having AfCFTA in alignment with BRICS were as follows: Is the continent considered a South–South economic partner or is it serving individual trading interests of BRICS countries? These questions are asked particularly since South–South co-operation between BRICS and Africa has been premised on increased trade volumes and foreign direct investments amongst others (Anwar, 2015). Is Africa viewed from a prism of being an equal South–South economic partner or it is viewed from an optic of a ‘development laggard’ that is serving individual trading interests of BRICS countries? More importantly, how should BRICS ensure that South–South relations through continental projects, such as the AfCFTA, go beyond political rhetoric and become a reality?

Building continental infrastructure is vital and must be pursued with all vigour. Financial support from the BRICS countries should be earmarked for infrastructure development

There was a general consensus that BRICS countries should play a role in continental infrastructure. Based on the fact that during the plenary discussions, most of the BPF members indicated their respective countries’ role in promoting Africa’s developmental agenda from individual country economic diplomacy interests. There is, therefore, a need to utilise the National Development Bank (NDB) to serve as a source of funding from all the BRICS members in one pool to facilitate infrastructure development. The NDB is a multilateral development bank established by BRICS countries with the purpose of mobilising resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs) (New Development Bank, 2016).

In 2017, former President Zuma indicated that the establishment of the NDB headquarters in South Africa were a

milestone for the continent as the bank has been mandated to fund African infrastructure, especially since African countries do not have adequate infrastructure connection (Sulaiman, 2017). Despite all the suggestions that the BRICS should partner with Africa, this economic partnership process remains at country level with BRICS member countries pursuing their own economic measures on the continent. The 2021 African Bank Report also indicated that the bank intended to further expand its reach within and beyond its current member countries, delivering development benefits to a larger share of the world’s population living in EMDCs. Hopefully, this expansion process will begin soon with a focus on the AfCFTA infrastructure development, which would be a win-win investment for both the BRICS Bank and the continent.

In promoting parliamentary diplomacy, the BRICS Parliament should position itself as a legislative body to influence critical measures that would serve as a link between the BRICS Bank and continental infrastructure and oversee that implementation thereof. Legislative measures could be drawn to ensure policy processes that would promote governance measures of accountability and transparency between the BRICS member states and the continent regarding AfCFTA infrastructure.

Commission Two: Energy issues in BRICS countries: Just transition of coal to hydrogen energy

All the BRICS countries are currently key global players in the coal, oil, gas and nuclear sectors. The decisions and trajectories of the BRICS countries will be critical to meeting global targets, as will their efforts to support more efficient, just use of energy in the developing world. Moreover, the BRICS countries comprise nearly 3,2 billion people, and account for approximately 40% of the world’s energy consumption, making them a global force to reckon with from





an energy perspective. Without these nations onboard, there will be no Just Energy Transition from coal to hydrogen energy.

The hydrogen economy is defined as an industrial system in which the dominant role of the energy carrier and its fuel is performed by hydrogen together with electricity. A Just Transition (JT) transaction, on the other hand, is designed to address complex challenges of financing a transition away from coal into the hydrogen economy by reducing the negative impacts on workers, small businesses and low-income communities. A BRICS energy discussion was deemed critical as coal not only remains one of the most important energy resources in the world but many livelihoods in the BRICS countries still depend on it.

The African continent's overall contribution to global GHG emissions is already considered low at less than 4%. The quest, therefore, is not how to reduce the carbon footprint among African countries. South Africa was a major part of this discussion as it became one of the first countries globally to sign up for the COP 26, the UN's 26th climate change summit, proposed Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) from coal to hydrogen production (Creamer, 2022).

Therefore, the key questions that were addressed were whether a global supply chain for hydrogen technologies can become a geo-economic benefit for the BRICS countries and the continent, and if so how? Moreover, what are the practicalities of JET required to ensure a sustainable inclusive economic growth in emerging countries. Finally, one of the key points raised was that the end game of a JET should not just be to achieve a zero-carbon economy, but to also ensure that the development of new opportunities in green hydrogen are maximised to benefit all stakeholders including rural mining communities

Include local communities in the JET process through social justice and local inclusiveness.

The focus on this session was on South Africa's capacity to implement the JET process and to include the coal mining communities in the JET process. Community inclusiveness of the JET process meant ensuring that they participate in the hydrogen economy through job creation, business linkages and capacity development. One of the key questions in this session was whether the transition created another unjust transition in terms of new forms of discrimination, skills obsolescence, job insecurity and labour instability? It was argued that the concept of 'just transition' in South Africa also needs to be critically unpacked as the mining era, post-1994, has not successfully contributed to the local economic development of the surrounding mining communities.

The localisation of the JET is also worrisome because, despite South Africa's legislative frameworks, the process is externally driven, particularly from a financial perspective. Some argue that South Africa seems to have dug itself into a green structural adjustment hole very rapidly since 2012. Most of the BRICS countries, despite having signed climate change agreements to reduce carbon emissions, are implementing JET processes focused on energy sustainability driven by their countries. JET in some of these BRICS countries is not premised on global grants and loans. Countries, such as China, despite subscribing to green development, are doubling down on coal production. According to Bloomberg, China is building a vast array of new coal-fired power stations, potentially more than the operating capacity of the US (Bloomberg News, 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that China is also the world's largest producer of hydrogen, and plans to produce 100 000 to 200 000 tons of renewable-based hydrogen annually and have a fleet of

50 000 hydrogen-fuelled vehicles by 2025 (CSIS, 2022).

Brazil, which has a long history with non-fossil fuels, should also be utilised as a case study by the BRICS countries in relation to South Africa and the continent. More than 80% of its electricity already comes from renewable sources, such as hydropower. In essence, Brazil's electricity generation is dominated by hydro resources, which represent more than 60% of its electricity generation (Baker Institute, 2022). This is despite Brazil producing 7 721 681.55 tons of coal per year ranking 27th in the world. Coal accounts for approximately 5,8% of the country's total primary energy supply (Baker Institute, 2022), which is minimal compared to the country's dependence on renewable energy.

In the final analysis, in as far as JET is concerned amongst the BRICS countries and the rest of the continent, pertinent questions were raised regarding prospects and challenges in phasing coal, a critical energy resource. Creating a just transitional balance has proven critical amongst all emerging economies as in the case of India, where as many as four million people are employed directly and indirectly in their coal industry (Vaidyanathan, 2021). In the case of South Africa, coal has become the lifeline of the local communities, which are some of India's poorest based in the coal belt communities.

It is argued here that the capacity to implement the JET process needs to be revisited as the South is not exactly at the same level energy wise as the West. From an AfCFTA perspective, BRICS countries could try to promote efforts focused on how the continent can sustainably harness its existing resources to meet the growing demand for energy. The continent is still facing a large shortfall in energy production as more than 640 million of the continent's 1,4 billion people do not have electricity (Phiri, 2023), which is necessary to not only lift citizens out of poverty but also to achieve a sustainable path to a net-zero future. Parliamentary diplomacy is essential in playing an oversight role in this process as green energy has become a complex multibillion dollar industry that the continent could again lose out from if the process is not localised to ensure local economic growth, which would feed into the global value chain.

Commission Three: Climate change issues in BRICS countries: Harnessing legislative development to effect change

The world is in a climate emergency according to the United Nations (United Nations, Nd). The concentration of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere is wreaking havoc across the world and threatening lives, economics, health and food. (United Nations, Nd). Moreover, in order to acquire zero carbon, emerging economies need investments well beyond \$2 trillion annually by 2030 (Africa News, 2022).

Climate transitions are also playing into the way internation-

al relationships are changing, creating an impetus for the BRICS countries to apply their geopolitical influence (United Nations, Nd). In 2022, Brazil, India, China and South Africa uniformly condemned developed countries as having 'double standards', as rich countries increasingly use fossil fuels while simultaneously pressuring developing countries to move away from these. There has been a significant increase in the consumption and production of fossil fuels in the past year by developed countries, even as they continue to press developing countries to move away from the same resources (van Diemen, 2022).

Climate change poses a significant threat to African countries' economic, social and environmental sustainability. In particular, 2023 was a year of climate carnage in Africa as at least 15 700 people have lost their lives to extreme weather disasters, while another 34 million have been affected. From flooding to intense heatwaves and drought, these devastating statistics represent a human emergency on an unprecedented scale, (Reliefweb, 2023) which will have an impact on AfCFTA implementation. The combination of climate change, poverty and action (or in-action) in Africa paints a complex picture. Natural disasters push vulnerable communities to the limits of their resilience, while poverty hampers their capacity to recover (Reliefweb, 2023). At the same time, a lack of in-country emergency preparedness and climate adaptation strategies leaves many nations on the back foot. This is where BRICS innovation and strategic partnerships could make a significant difference on the continent.

Recommendations and the way forward

Parliamentary cooperation forms an integral part of the BRICS cooperation, and the MoU serves as a transformative blueprint, marking a new era in the institutionalisation of the parliamentary dimension of BRICS cooperation. It is now critical that the BPF joins other multilateral forums, such as the EU Parliament, to not only become a legislative body, but strategically craft a clear masterplan that represents the institutions' interest. The key thematics that were discussed at the BPF demonstrate a need to establish a master plan, so that the Parliamentary Forum can effectively monitor and follow up on matters raised.

The sessions presented highlight a need for the South African government to continue pressing forward on the BRICS and not just have parliamentary debates, but develop a modus operandi that could influence global governance from a South-South cooperation perspective. The AfTCA should continue being a point of departure within BRICS and the global South. Continental infrastructure development will require more than just BRICS but also the global South of which many of their countries also trade on the continent. Given the impact of BRICS countries on promoting infrastructure at different levels on the continent, the question is how to utilise the NDB to address continental infrastructure in a constructive manner.

Moreover, AfCFTA brings with it greater prospects for BRICS and Africa partnership and could play a more value-adding role in promoting South–South trade. This is so because, in the medium- to long term, future forecasts and/or projections indicate that it will be BRICS companies that will usher in a new promising investor climate that will, correspondingly, bring with it additional business opportunities needed to undertake economic and infrastructure investment projects necessary to advance regional trade integration in Africa (Munemo, 2021). Suffice to say, Parliamentary diplomacy has a critical role in ensuring strategic oversight of accountability.

Strategic policy recommendations

Parliamentary diplomacy:

The successful BRICS Parliament Forum portrayed a distinct role and value of BRICS parliamentary diplomacy in complementing and reinforcing the visibility and impact of BRICS foreign policy from a legislative angle.

BRICS Parliament and South–South cooperation:

The Forum demonstrated the importance of parliamentary diplomacy as a means to reach out to more diverse stakeholders in the global South and to better understand percep-

tions of geopolitical positions, in an increasingly complex and multipolar international context

BRICS Parliament governance oversight:

The BRICS Parliament should align itself as a key player between the BRICS Bank and continental infrastructure governance oversight and accountability to ensure that the AfTFCA infrastructure process develops without any drawbacks, such as corruption or lack of due diligence.

BRICS Green Investment:

BRICS Parliamentary diplomacy in the green industry is critical given how it has becoming one of the top global industries with immeasurable impact in BRICS and the continent.

BRICS Parliamentary Climate Change Framework:

Climate change continues to pose a significant threat to the continental developmental trajectory, which is complicated further by geo-politics. A BRICS green framework that is buttressed by scientific data from BRICS institutions is urgently needed. The database should also consist of a disaster loss and damage section inclusive of measures, such as early warning systems.



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