

South Africa goes BRICS: the importance of 'ubuntu' in foreign policy

VASCO MARTINS

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

Ubuntu, a Bantu word originating from Southern Africa defines a concept African countries should never forget. Nelson Mandela explains ubuntu as a traveler through a country stopping at a village and not needing to ask for food or water. Once he stopped, the people gave him food and entertained him. Ubuntu, Mandela continues, has several other meanings connected to the example mentioned above, yet it does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is, is one going to do so in order to enable the larger community around to improve?

South Africa was invited to join the BRIC group of countries in December 2010. On the 14th and 15th of April 2011, South African President Jacob Zuma was present at the 3rd BRIC – now BRICS – summit in Beijing, officially acknowledging the country's membership.

Much has been written and said about South Africa's very clear economic, demographic and territorial differences in comparison to other BRICS countries and not without certain reasoned logic. With a GDP only slightly higher than Portugal's and a population approximately the size of Spain's, South Africa lags incredibly behind in most indicators when compared to the other BRICS states. Nevertheless, South Africa's position in this forum is not

as a medium-small economy, but as the richest country in a fast growing continent, Africa. South Africa's inclusion in such a group is therefore somewhat plausible, as the country has easy access to Africa's markets and most importantly to its resources, a precious good for the raw material hungry BRICS states.

In the BRICS group, South Africa will have the opportunity not only to belong to one of the world's top forums for economic discussion, to influence policy alignment and build pressure to change the international economic system towards becoming more inclusive – a policy matching South Africa's South-South investments –, but also to expand some of its comparative advantage sectors in order to better integrate into the 'big club's' international commercial routes.

Experts have doubted the advantages of this new development for South African foreign policy, by considering that it will be difficult to politically substantiate its position among such a wealthy group of states. Arguing that the BRICS have barely any political implications, pundits consider that the group still remains a 'talk shop' composed of annual summits but without practical cooperation or specific programs – unlike the IBSA forum, which has seen relevant production and collaboration between



its members – hence diminishing their expectations for South Africa's membership when compared to the group's own capabilities.¹

Yet, other noteworthy implications arise not concerning South Africa's position in the BRICS, but rather the (re) defining of its place and identity in the world, and most significantly, in the African continent. Indeed, South Africa's inclusion in the BRICS supposes a sort of meager alignment with the political manifestations of the group on the international arena. All the formerly known BRIC countries have at one stage or another opposed or criticized the westernized system of international dominance, adopted revisionist agendas and made use of the system itself to present their condemnations and disagreements. Individually and as a group, the BRIC states have usually withdrawn into an isolationist position, refusing to become involved in whatever international endeavor the western aligned community has decided to undertake. Although it is impractical to suppose South Africa will abide by such isolationist criteria, it is important for the country to define how its membership to a club as strict as the BRICS will influence its position in the African continent.

South Africa is the wealthiest, most politically influential country in Africa. Above all, this is not a position South Africa enjoys in all its realistic underpinnings – that is, intrinsically connected to the prevalence of its national interests – but rather a weapon of political intervention that has worked in attempting to hold back and remove obstacles to African peace, prosperity and progress. South Africa's unlikely, yet possible retraction into an irresponsibly isolationist position – such as those of Russia and China – would not favor any progress in the continent, but only hamper the efforts of one of the most democracy-driven countries defending a peace-seeking, South-South agenda. Even Brazil, who supposedly also shares this South-South political leaning has not done

much to uphold the idea in international forums, but rather attempted to work around the post-Cold War order while building its own status on the broader global stage. South Africa is also one of the most important players in the process of African unity, be it political or economic. By entering the BRICS, the country will gain much more visibility, more political influence in decision-making, overall greater 'power'. Accordingly, and as a country that is miles away in terms of economic and political development in comparison to the rest of Africa, will South Africa become overwhelmed by this new BRICS status and forget the very roots of its foreign policy? If not, will South Africa work to enrich its own accounts or will it do so while bringing other African countries into the fold? The inclusion of South Africa into the BRIC group already abides by the principle of access to markets, which means the BRICS are not only interested in South Africa but in the African continent. However, by inviting South Africa, the BRICS have provided it with a perfect opportunity to become an uncontested, praised African leader. The opportunity to represent African interests in such a forum is indeed 'the best Christmas present ever'.² But if South Africa shies away from its natural leadership and follows its own dreams of greatness, then it might well be a poisoned gift. If there is ubuntu in South Africa politics, this is the time to encourage it.

1 Keith Campbell, senior deputy editor of Engineering News interviewed by Mariaan Web, Second Take, Creamer Media.

2 Jean-Jacques Cornish, "S. Africa formally invited to join BRIC: minister" (AFP, 24 December 2010).

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão

ASSISTANT EDITORS | Laura Tereno • Vasco Martins

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5 - 1750-306 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

IPRIS Viewpoints is a publication of IPRIS.

The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPRIS.



1st

EDP ranks top 1 worldwide in the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, in the electricity sector. It reflects our role in the economical, environmental and social dimensions.

For the third consecutive year, EDP is listed on the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, the most widely quoted stock market indicators to track the financial and sustainability performance of companies. This year we are the worldwide leader in our business sector, a recognition that rewards EDP's commitment to sustainable development. A company capable of creating wealth without ever losing sight of the social and environmental aspects. This is the way EDP performs, which reflects all our employees and stakeholders engagement for a better future.



EDP is a member of the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes. For more information, please visit www.djsi.com. EDP is a member of the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes. For more information, please visit www.djsi.com.



feel our energy