

BRICS under Russia's Presidency: Towards An Emerging Global Architecture?

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An association of five emerging economies popularly referred to as BRICS under Russia's presidency (2024) has begun its work with the first meeting of Sherpas/Sous-Sherpas, held January 30 – February 1, with participation of new countries – Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The meeting wholeheartedly noted substantial contributions in shaping the 2024 agenda and comprehensive plan of activities scheduled to take place in the Russian Federation.

During its chairmanship of BRICS, Russia will do its best to find solutions to economic, policy and humanitarian issues, to strengthen common consensus and approaches with partner countries.

During the meeting, chaired by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russia's Sherpa in BRICS, Sergey A. Ryabkov, the priorities of the association were outlined.

Representatives of Russian ministries and departments gave detailed briefings on key areas of cooperation. The importance of implementing a number of Russian initiatives was noted, in particular, the launch of an Integrated Early Response System to the risks of mass infectious diseases, the establishment of an Industrial Competence Center based on UNIDO, the BRICS Medical Association and a specialized journal, and strengthening cooperation in the field of transport and tourism.

As part of the implementation of the instructions of the leaders of the BRICS countries following the results of the XV summit of the association (Johannesburg, August 22-24, 2023), discussions continued on the modalities of the category of BRICS partner states, as well as increasing the role of national currencies and payment instruments in cross-border transactions of the "ten" countries.

All participants in the meeting confirmed their focus on further constructive work within the three “baskets” of the BRICS strategic partnership: in the field of politics and security, economics and finance, culture and humanitarian ties.

It was pointed out that it’s about time to tackle extraordinary challenges and to steer the association towards creating a more fairer and interactive world. A quick analysis shows that the present situation is engulfed with new conflicts and unprecedented threats that endanger further sustainable development. But in a conscientious manner, BRICS is set to handle the collective tasks and priorities, the fragile situation in Ukraine, the human catastrophe emerging from the horrific Israeli war against Palestine and its impact on the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

At the same time, Ukraine appeared in the discussions. It was pointed out that Russia pays great attention and respects the initiatives put forward by the BRICS countries regarding a settlement in Ukraine. This includes the Brazilian initiative, the proposals of the People’s Republic of China, and the outstanding role of the Republic of South Africa in discussing and promoting approaches to a potential peace settlement.

In addition, BRICS is also targeting result-oriented work and opportunities in the developing countries, especially those in the Global South. Its invaluable platforms are available to ensure cohesive and sustainable responses to the challenges, and for fostering cooperation and for renewed multidimensional partnerships, for instance, with Africa.

Despite dozens of applications to join, BRICS added only five new members on January 1, 2024. Unsurprisingly, Argentina turned down its invitation, citing sovereign right to make such as a final decision based on domestic problems and limited internal resources. At present, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Senegal, Thailand, Venezuela and Vietnam are all awaiting an invitation to join BRICS after filing an official membership application.

Over those three days (Jan. 30 – Feb. 1) the meeting held ten working sessions, during which representatives of Russian ministries and departments, business and academic circles presented detailed briefings on key areas of cooperation in BRICS and the initiatives of the Russian chairmanship in the association. BRICS partners have assured to lend their support for the chairmanship plans and their readiness to vigorously work together this year.

Fruitful and constructive discussions took place on a number of pressing issues in the fields of trade and investment, transport and energy, technology and innovation, and sustainable development. They exchanged views on strengthening cooperation in the fields of education, healthcare and sports, and confirmed their focus on maintaining and deepening ties between business and experts.

This year members will work to implement the BRICS Economic Partnership Strategy until 2025, including by strengthening supply chains, developing the digital economy, supporting small and medium-sized businesses, stimulating tourist flows, and interaction in the field of transport. They are aimed at launching the BRICS Contact Group on Climate and Sustainable Development, initiated by the Russian side.

It noted the great potential for cooperation between the BRICS countries in the field of healthcare, and hope that this year the practical work of the Integrated Early Warning

System for the risks of mass infectious diseases will be launched. The meeting plans to facilitate the connection of new countries to the BRICS Vaccine Research Center. There was also the proposal to create a Medical Association and a BRICS specialized journal. They welcome the start of the functioning of the Working Group on Nuclear Medicine.

Under Russia's presidency, BRICS will also continue focusing on strengthening cooperation along anti-terrorism, anti-corruption and anti-drug lines, as well as in the field of international information security, and continue coordinating the approaches of the BRICS countries to resolving key foreign policy issues, including at such international platforms as the UN, G20, and WTO.

They also consider it important to increase humanitarian ties between our peoples, contacts between ordinary people, and expand opportunities for mutual enrichment of the countries included in the association.

The BRICS association sees a growing interest of friendly, like-minded states around the world in developing cooperation with BRICS. They are impressed by the basic principles on which interaction is based: compliance with international law, respect for each other's interests and the right of each state to a sovereign choice of development path. Responding to the desire of a wide range of countries to strengthen ties with BRICS, the association has begun to develop modalities for the category of partner states of the association. It is envisaged also to actively use the outreach/BRICS plus dialogue mechanisms to interact with third countries to make significant contributions to achieving practical results in all areas of the strategic partnership.

Newcomers at BRICS

BRICS welcomed its newcomers including Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, based on the decision by BRICS leaders made in Johannesburg, officially became full-fledged members from January 2024. Egypt expects Russia's BRICS chairmanship to address the challenges in the area of food and energy security, Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister and head of the country's delegation in BRICS, Ragui al-Etrebi said at the meeting.

"We are perfectly aware of the fact that gradual integration and new members completely joining the BRICS work is a serious challenge. However, we are convinced that under the skilled management, everything will be managed to successfully solve each of those challenges," the official said.

He further touched other important issues such as finances, deepening of cooperation in such areas as investment and trade, industrial transformation, the use of ICT [information and communications technologies] for the interest of development, boosting maritime transport, logistics, as well as solution of problems of the lack of food and energy security.

Tehran expects the shift to payments in national currencies within BRICS to increase during Russia's chairmanship, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister on economic issues, the republic's BRICS Sherpa Mehdi Safari said at the meeting. It was connected with ways to more actively use national and local currencies and payment tools in cross-border transactions in order to reduce the negative side effects of the current dollar-dominated global economic system.

The Iranian side plans to participate actively in BRICS events this year, the diplomat added.

“We are also ready to work on all necessary solutions and documents for the 16th BRICS summit in Kazan in October,” he noted. “As far as 2024 is concerned we hope that the economic and financial direction of cooperation, in particular, the issues of the banking sector, payment instruments, cancellation of cross-national currency and the use of national currencies will be solved.”

Lavrov's Thoughts at BRICS meeting

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a BRICS sherpa and sous-sherpa meeting on January 31, also outlined the agenda parameters – related to the objective processes underway and deep transformation of international architecture. This also connects the present-day notion of multilateralism and the popular slogan of inclusiveness intended change the global politics, security and the economy.

“Washington and its European satellites are spending vast amounts of money to contain Russia, in stark contrast to the Western capitals’ approach to the Global South, especially the African countries. There are cases where support for Ukraine is financed by suspending projects in Africa and the Middle East,” according to Lavrov.

Nevertheless, the Global Majority – the states of Eurasia, the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean – gain a stronger foothold in the world system. Most of these countries are increasingly asserting their national interests and identities and striving for genuine strategic independence in pragmatic pathways.

In principle, Russia's BRICS chairmanship is “Strengthening Multilateralism for Equitable Global Development and Security” – and as BRICS is an association with mutual principles for the Global South and East. Its basic principles are based on mutual respect, a sovereign choice of development path and the implementation of the fundamental principle of the UN Charter, that is, the sovereign equality of states.

Lavrov spoke about visible impact of the turbulent geopolitical situation, the key trends of forming a multi-polar world, emphasised the growing impact of the cultural and civilisational factor on world politics, and the importance of facilitating various cooperation mechanisms that would be resistant to the destructive actions of unfriendly countries. He also pointed to successful creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre.

BRICS Vaccine R&D Center

In March 2022, BRICS made one more huge step forward, perhaps driven by the Covid-19 pandemic that spread across the world, to launch finally the BRICS Vaccine R&D Center strongly backed by China. Under the leadership of Russia, it first proposed cooperation on countering infectious diseases as a priority for BRICS. The final joint declaration of the 2015 BRICS summit in Ufa, Russia, contains instructions by the leaders to work consistently on managing the risk of disease outbreaks.

“We are concerned about growing and diversifying global threats posed by communicable and non-communicable diseases. It has a negative impact on economic and social development, especially in developing and in the least developed countries,” stated the 2015 BRICS declaration.

Among the group, China and India are ready stepping up to share information, and

experiences with BRICS members, conduct joint research and develop drugs and vaccines based on respecting each other's sovereignty and national conditions. Later during the rotating chairmanship of South Africa, it firmly re-proposed the creation of full-scale coordinating research and development center and planned to be located in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Nevertheless, there has not been any practical achievements in that direction. But as China took the helm of BRICS, effective from January 2022, experts and research analysts have since showed deep interests. Finally, March 22 marked the launch the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Center, involving the heads of relevant agencies from the five countries. The initiative to establish the BRICS Vaccine R&D Center, as said earlier, was incorporated in the final declaration of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, South Africa (July 26-27, 2018).

It has brought together leading research institutions and companies in the member states – the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Brazil), the Anatoly Smorodintsev Research Institute of Influenza (Russia), the Indian Council of Medical Research (India), the Sinovac Life Sciences company (China) and South African Medical Research Council (South Africa).

The main objective is to share best practices and strengthen practical cooperation in research, development, production and distribution of vaccines to ensure their greater availability as BRICS countries account for 40% of the global population and the potential of research is at the highest level. It makes possible to swiftly respond to biological threats, coordinate efforts to control infectious diseases and ensure protection of the population.

China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin explained, during his regular media briefing on March 23, that the BRICS Vaccine R&D Center and workshop on vaccine cooperation would be a network of internet-based virtual centers, and the establishment of physical centers would only begin after comprehensive feasibility assessment.

The establishment of the BRICS Vaccine R&D Center demonstrated the determination of BRICS countries to focus on vaccine cooperation, deepen public health cooperation and promote public health, scientific and technological cooperation among BRICS countries. It was first Russia's initiative to establish the BRICS Integrated Early Warning System for preventing mass infectious disease risks, but the Center was created during the Chinese chairmanship of the BRICS.

BRICS New Development Bank

The New Development Bank (NDB), created by the BRICS countries, works proactively on financial issues concerning projects in member countries. The agreement on establishing the BRICS New Development Bank was reached on July 15, 2014 in Brazil's Fortaleza. The bank's starting capital was set at \$100 bln. The Shanghai-headquartered bank has been set up to finance infrastructure projects and projects for sustainable development of BRICS and other developing countries.

Over the years, the bank has approved over 100 projects for a total of more than \$33 billion in areas such as transportation, water supply, clean energy, digital and social infrastructure, and urban construction. In 2021, the NDB began expanding its membership and admitted Bangladesh, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Uruguay as its new member countries. It has the second representative office in South Africa.

As an association, it follows the same trends but on a global scale. BRICS represents a cooperation network for regional and subregional processes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. BRICS association boasts an aggregate GDP, in terms of purchasing power parity, that has reached about one third of the global value and has exceeded that of the G7 countries. BRICS accounts for 30 percent of dry land and 45 percent of the world's population, a substantial part of the global production of oil and other resources, and about 25 percent of global exports. In a nutshell, the association now has the ability to form a global agenda by consistently upholding the interests of the Global Majority.

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