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# BRICS...AIAUAEITSAKNSA - a hopeless search for identity



Here is a new task for Lord Jim O'Neill, 22 years after he coined the acronym BRIC, to make a new and meaningful one out of the mosaic of letters from the title.

It was easy to add an "S" to the famous name of the new alliance of the largest developing economies in 2010 when South Africa joined the bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, and China.

However, putting together something meaningful using only first letters seems hopeless, even for Jim O'Neill.

The alliance, which has aimed, since its establishment in 2009, to counterbalance Western political and economic global dominance, is approaching its 15th summit in Johannesburg in August with many concerns about its own identity.

The summit in South Africa, often heralded as historic, due to expectations that the alliance would be expanded to include new members, will be forced to scale back ambitions.

After a meeting with her colleagues from the alliance, the South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor, said that the bloc "was not quite ready to accept" new members.

"Once we have a document that offers clear guidance, we will then take that to the summit in August. We'd like that work to be concluded by the time the summit sits", said Pandor, who presided over an important ministerial overture before the August leaders' meeting.

## Everyone wants expansion, but...

The list of potential new BRICS members is neither completely clear nor very public. While three countries - Algeria, Iran, and Argentina - have openly highlighted their candidacy, the number of other interested parties is between 9 and 16.

Most often, Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, Senegal,

Afghanistan, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have been mentioned, although some other, but unnamed, countries have been considered too.

In principle, all the "founding fathers" of BRICS want the alliance to be expanded, expecting that in this way, their idea of gathering developing economies around the world would be better distributed.

However, when they got down to business after verbal declarations only, obstacles began to pile up, one after the other.

The last member to join, South Africa, was accepted on a territorial basis as a representative of Africa, where the BRIC members saw fertile ground for expanding their influence.

## Territories or economic power?

This principle is still valid today when moving towards a new expansion. A tentative list of candidates for membership shows the aim is to balance the membership according to the regional principle, so that there are members from Latin America, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa.

Brazil, as one of the founders, accepts that principle but at the same time fears the regional imbalance in favour of the states from China's orbit, so as a counterbalance, it strongly supports the future membership of Argentina.

Brazil is in favour of maintaining the principle of admitting new members following the recommendation from the existing members, but this is opposed by India.

New Delhi is advocating admission based on "merit", that is, fulfilment of the criteria that BRICS would set for future members, something similar to the EU membership model.

South Africa has little reason to wish for enlargement, particularly to the large African

members. In the case of Nigeria's admission, for example, or Ethiopia and Kenya, it would lose the status of "voice of Africa," which it has as a current member, even though it is by far the smallest economy in the bloc.

Because of its constantly declining economic performance, but also because of its rapprochement with Russia during its aggression against Ukraine, South Africa was not invited to the G7 summit in Hiroshima this year, even though it has been a regular participant in previous years, but the African Union was invited instead.

## The inevitable dominance of China

The expansion of BRICS is not as easy as the founders and candidates for membership ecstatically expected.

All of them have a problem with the BRICS identity, which has still not been established. They are still looking for an answer to what brought them together, and whether they could find common values around which they would redefine global governance, as they often say.

The fact that the combined GDP of the BRICS members exceeded the G7 for the first time, which is often flagged as an indicator of the supremacy of non-Western factors, does not mean anything.

China's dominance within the bloc is pronounced. The Chinese economy is more than twice larger than all other members combined, and this is a parameter that will determine the BRICS' existence for a long time, regardless of its proclaimed global goals.

Regarding the possible expansion of the bloc, China's interest will be for the new members to be primarily from its orbit of influence, whether located in Asia or elsewhere, which is openly feared by, for example, Brazil.

On the other hand, the rivalry between the

two by far the most powerful members - China and India - which do not agree on any significant issue, not even on a common border, will burden relations in the alliance for as long as it exists.

## New Non-Aligned Movement

This will bring a geographical distribution of influence, reduce internal cohesion, and increase rivalry among members if BRICS overcomes difficulties and begins to expand.

Too broad and fast expansion that might be difficult to resist will bring the BRICS into the ranks of the new Non-Aligned Movement, a loose and ineffective organisation whose reach extends to proclamations about a fairer and more equal world once a year.

If, on the other hand, BRICS wants to position itself as an economic, technological, and investment counterweight to the existing associations led by the West, it will not be able to do so in the composition in which it started its journey.

The economy of only two of the five member states, the largest ones - China and India, has grown in the past decade while the parameters of Russia, Brazil, and South Africa have been devastating, each for its own reason.

And when it comes to dethroning the dollar and installing some new currency as a means of international trade, which has followed BRICS as its principal and hidden goal since its establishment, expectations become completely unrealistic.

For Jim O'Neill, the godfather of BRICS, those expectations are "amusing" and "fanciful".

"How on earth can people seriously believe these guys are going to introduce a shared currency, I mean, who would run it? Would there be a BRICS central bank? The idea you have a shared BRICS currency, this is just the kind of nonsense that they symbolically say because it just sounds good", said O'Neill.