THE BRICS YEAR OF CHINA

Theme: Foster high quality BRICS partnership, usher in a new era of global development

Mamphokhu Khuluvhe

1. Introduction

BRICS cooperation has witnessed a magnificent 16 years since its inception in 2006 and has steadily developed into a stable platform for dialogue and cooperation between its members. The acronym BRICS derives from the five emerging economies that have united to develop a shared vision, commitment and cooperation regarding their relations particularly on trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges. These five emerging economies are commonly known as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The BRICS countries have different socio-economic challenges and political systems, however, their joint efforts have witnessed increasing political trust, deepening practical cooperation and closer people-to-people exchanges in an open, inclusive, and win-win spirit. As a group, BRICS countries have an important political and economic role to play on the world stage as they occupy about 26% of the planet’s land, home to 41% of the world population, constitute 46% of world workforce, 24% of global GDP and 16% of world trade. In 2021, the import and export value of BRICS amounted to $8.55 trillion, up 33.4% year-on-year. In the same year, bilateral trade between China and BRICS countries reached $490.42 billion, up 39.2% year-on-year. The originator of the acronym BRICS, Lord Jim O’Neill, recently commented that the performance of BRICS countries would be the most decisive factor in determining the global economic growth for the next decade. This reinforces the position of the BRICS economies in the current global economic landscape.

2. Recovery from COVID-19 pandemic

Currently, the vision of the BRICS countries is seen as crucial to address the Covid-19 pandemic that led to a global economic crisis and exacerbated vulnerabilities in the form of unemployment, income inequality and poverty across countries. As with other countries, the COVID-19 health crisis has had a severe effect on the BRICS countries, with India, Brazil and Russia listed among the top five countries in the world in terms of infections. The movement of major macroeconomic indicators shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to serious economic contractions in BRICS countries, except for China. Table 1 below shows that GDP for Brazil, India, Russia, and South Africa fell in 2020, the year the pandemic emerged as compared to 2019. This demonstrate that the COVID-19 crisis has led to significant economic losses and has worsened unemployment, poverty, and inequality in the four BRICS countries. In contrast, China has been an outstanding emerging economy, recording an increase of $408 billion in GDP from $14 280 billion in 2019 to $14 688 billion in 2020.

The 2021 GDP figures, however, shows convincing evidence of recovery for all the BRICS countries as China, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa recorded an increase of $3 046 billion, $506 billion, $287 billion, $160 billion, and $85 billion respectively in GDP from 2020 to 2021. The recovery, even so, shows significant divergence amongst the BRICS countries, providing China through its BRICS Chairmanship with a unique opportunity to steer the BRICS

---

countries onto a path of inclusive recovery, sustainable development, and usher in a new era of global development.

Table 1: GDP (current US$ billion), 2017-2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,064</td>
<td>1,917</td>
<td>1,873</td>
<td>1,449</td>
<td>1,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>12,310</td>
<td>13,895</td>
<td>14,280</td>
<td>14,688</td>
<td>17,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2,651</td>
<td>2,703</td>
<td>2,832</td>
<td>2,668</td>
<td>3,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1,574</td>
<td>1,657</td>
<td>1,693</td>
<td>1,488</td>
<td>1,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Bank Database

Figure 1 below shows that in 2020, India, South Africa, Brazil and Russia recorded a contraction of 6.6%, 6.4%, 3.9% and 2.7% respectively. China recorded a positive economic growth of 2.2% in 2020 despite all the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. It should be noted that although China was the first to be affected by the pandemic, the country has been able to control it effectively since 2020 which has aided its economic performance. The GDP growth rates figures presented in Figure 1 shows significant divergent and heterogeneity among the BRICS countries that could be attributed to the way that the duration of the lockdown and the intensity of Covid-19 as well as the waves of infection and vaccination drive has impacted these countries’ national income or wealth. For example, India, South Africa, Brazil and Russia have witnessed multiple waves of infection while China managed to contain the spread of the debilitating infection enabling it to recover economically quicker than the other four BRICS countries.

The 2021 GDP growth rates figures shows that all the BRICS countries were able to come out of the contraction and have all returned to positive growth. The GDP growth rates of all the BRICS countries is now at pre-pandemic levels, with five countries’ growth rates are all higher than what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of multiple vaccines by the end of 2020 and early 2021 imparted great hope for containing the pandemic and bringing production activities to normality. In addition, the scientific community in the BRICS countries were able to develop vaccines at the same pace as the vaccines being developed by the advanced economies, even though some of the BRICS countries had to rely on imported vaccines.
The BRICS countries have forged strong ties with each other, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, to seize the opportunities that might emerge amid the crisis by planning for and working towards a bright post-pandemic future. The BRICS year of China took place at an opportune time to ensure that the five BRICS countries continue to strengthen their relations and collectively take proactive measures to address the pre-existing issues of their economies and engaging in further structural reforms with a view to improving productivity of various factors of production.

3. High-quality cooperation in BRICS

The BRICS partnership consisting of five emerging countries is developing quite rapidly. In subsequent Summits, the BRICS countries as a collective, took various initiatives which have changed the world economic order and has committed to restructuring the global political and financial architecture to be more inclusive, fair, representative, and democratic with meaningful and greater participation of developing countries. The BRICS’ vision and spirit featuring mutual respect and understanding, equality, solidarity, openness, inclusiveness, and consensus is aligned to China’s vision which seeks to uphold true multilateralism and pursue both solidarity and win-win cooperation. Every year, the BRICS group host a Summit, on a rotational basis, which is attended by the leaders of each country with multilateral ties and invitation extending to other developing countries and international organizations. This year, the 14th BRICS Summit was held under the theme Foster High-quality BRICS Partnership, Usher in a New Era for Global Development under China’s chairmanship.

China’s chairmanship came at a time when the world is facing numerous challenges such as economic uncertainty, enduring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, food security, polarization, and threats to multilateralism. As the biggest economy within the BRICS group and a supporter of multilateralism, China’s theme of fostering high-quality BRICS
partnership built on the priority areas from all the previous BRICS presidencies and continues to inspire BRICS countries to work together to respond to the major concerns of the international community and develop a more comprehensive, closer, more practical, and inclusive partnership. China’s chairmanship sought to encourage BRICS collaboration to deliver on outcomes of previous summits and to actively engage and collaborate with other developing countries, as well as international organisations to safeguard the international supply chain and promote rapid economic and trade recovery among BRICS countries.

The BRICS China Year has been described by many as fruitful as it placed great emphasis on solidarity and openness as the world faces drastic changes. Of priority for China during its presidency, as indicated in the XIV BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration, are the following nine key areas:

3.1 Strengthening and reforming global governance
Noting that developing countries have shifted from a follower to a promoter of global governance, China urged BRICS countries to work in collaboration with other emerging economies and to strengthen coordination within the frameworks of the G20, World Trade Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund in order to make joint efforts to improve global economic governance. During the BRICS China Year, the five BRICS countries committed to maintaining a strong and effective Global Financial Safety Net with a quota-based and adequately resourced International Monetary Fund at its centre. The BRICS countries pushes for the completion of the General Review of Quotas in order to address the underrepresentation of emerging markets and developing countries in meaningful engagement re the governance of the International Monetary Fund, and to protect the voice and quota shares of the poorest and smallest members. As a member of the big family of developing countries, China is committed to work with emerging economies to promote the implementation of the Global Security Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative to accelerate global development, enhance global security governance, and safeguard world peace and tranquility.

3.2 Working in solidarity to combat Covid-19
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, BRICS countries have supported one another with medical supplies and carried out extensive cooperation on infection prevention and control, diagnosis and treatment protocols, and vaccines and drug research and development. As the world works together to confront Covid-19, BRICS countries have intensified cooperation in vaccines, health and traditional medicine and have supplied over one billion doses of vaccines to other countries. China already aids countries in need through the delivery of necessary materials and technologies to counter the threat raised by the pandemic. During the BRICS Year of China, the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre and a workshop on vaccine cooperation were launched. The five BRICS countries jointly proposed the launch of the Vaccine Research and Development Centre to strengthen vaccine cooperation and to ensure the accessibility and affordability of vaccines in developing countries through their equitable distribution as global public goods. The initiative is also aimed at enhancing BRICS countries’ capability to control infectious diseases. It places special emphasis on openness and welcomes more partners to join.
3.3 Promoting economic recovery
In order to promote economic recovery, the five BRICS countries committed to strengthening coordination on macroeconomic policies and multilateral cooperation, and to encourage other emerging economies to adopt responsible fiscal and monetary policies, so as to avoid negative spillovers on developing countries. The BRICS countries also agreed to uphold sound operation of the international economic and financial system.

3.4 Safeguarding peace and security
The BRICS countries continue to speak with one voice on issues related to international peace, security, and development to promote a more just and reasonable order. In the XIV BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration, the five countries jointly committed to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, stressed their commitment to the peaceful resolution of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, and to support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises.

3.5 Accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals
As COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and reversed years of progress on poverty, hunger, education, climate change, access to clean water, as well as environmental protection, BRICS countries collectively committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in all its three dimensions, namely, economic, social and environmental, and in a balanced and integrated manner. BRICS countries agreed to foster pragmatic cooperation in food security, improve capacity in ensuring the supply of food and other key agricultural produce through enhanced Agriculture Information Exchange System. Given its experience in poverty alleviation and improving food security, China has also committed to providing the necessary resources in the framework of the BRICS countries to fighting poverty and food insecurity and increase its contribution for sustainable development.

3.6 Maximise opportunities brought about by the digital era
BRICS countries have actively accelerated the use of its innovation framework to strengthen partnerships in green energy, internet technology and exchange of know how amongst scientists and technology experts. As a group, the five BRICS countries launched the BRICS Partnership on New Industrial Revolution Innovation Centre in 2021 to generate new development and momentum in technology, science, innovation, and digital transformation.

During the BRICS Year of China, the BRICs countries committed to working jointly to implement the BRICS Action Plan on Innovation Cooperation and to build the Network of BRICS Technology Transfer Centres. As a group, the BRICS countries note the importance to carry out activities such as BRICS STI Joint Call on research projects and BRICS Young Scientists Forum and to strengthen cooperation in flagship programs.

3.7 Increased cooperation in climate change
China highlighted the need for BRICS countries to work with the international community in order to stay committed to the full and effective implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Paris Agreement.
3.8 Deepening people-to-people exchanges
BRICS countries committed to promote exchanges and interactions between political parties, think tanks and civil society organizations and to make full use of mechanisms such as the internet for cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges to carry out activities in film, media and governance. The BRICS group will leverage the BRICS Business Council, the BRICS Women Business Alliance and BRICS Business Forum to intensify efforts in strengthening business ties and promoting practical and fruitful relations amongst BRICS countries. In addition, the BRICS countries committed to make full use of the BRICS Universities League and the BRICS Network University to promote exchanges and interactions between students and scholars and jointly cultivate high-level talents. The five countries as a group established a BRICS alliance for vocational education and committed to hold vocational skills competitions to build a platform of cooperation between vocational education institutes and enterprises.

3.9 BRICS expansion process
The BRICS agreed committed to reach out to more countries and international organizations through *BRICS Plus cooperation* to keep broadening the BRICS’ circle of friends. China’s proposal to expand BRICS is in the interest of all developing countries and aims to help improve global governance by enhancing South-South cooperation. Throughout China’s Presidency, the BRICS Plus events have attracted the participation of more than 50 non-BRICS countries, showing the increasing global influence of BRICS.

As a group, the BRICS countries needs to continue embracing the changes and keep abreast with the times. As a noticeable group of emerging economies, the BRICS cooperation need to set clearer priorities in their wide-ranging cooperation, make their cooperation more results-oriented and ensure that its benefits are fully delivered.

4. China-South Africa close cooperation
China has emerged as one of the major and closest economic partners of South Africa. The BRICS Year of China, 2022, marks 24 years of diplomatic and economic ties between China and South Africa. The economic co-operation between the two countries is multifaceted, ranging from education, trade to investment in infrastructure and loans. The benefits of relations with China are noticeable in South Africa, for example, exports and imports between the two countries have soared to unprecedented levels over the years, earning China the position of South Africa’s biggest trading partner and export destination for more than 12 years. Similarly, South Africa has become China’s largest trading partner in Africa. China and South African cooperation have maintained smooth trade channels and South Africa has made significant progress in exporting high-quality agro-products to China. The bilateral trade for example has reached over 54 billion US dollars in 2021, up over 50% year-on-year since 2015 which represents a new high for the two countries. Cooperation in culture, science and technology, education, tourism and other field have also made rapid progress. Of all African countries, South Africa draws the biggest number of Chinese students.

Since Covid-19 started, the BRICS partners have also provided large amounts of response supplies to South Africa, including sharing response experience with regards to prevention and control. The New Development Bank has provided in total two billion US dollars in loans to South Africa to fight Covid-19 and provide humanitarian assistance.
China and South Africa share common interests on many major international issues. The two countries have kept close cooperation in major international organizations and mechanisms such as the United Nations, the G20, and the BRICS mechanism to make greater contributions to enhancing the collective power and voice of developing countries in the international arena and promoting the establishment of a more just and rational international political and economic order. China values the relationship with South Africa and has always taken the development of ties with South Africa as a priority of China's foreign policy. In many bilateral meetings over the years, China has committed to make concerted efforts with South Africa to further expand bilateral exchanges and cooperation, increase exchanges between political parties and promote understanding and friendship in order to further promote China-South Africa comprehensive strategic partnership.

5. Conclusion
In the BRICS Year of China, BRICS countries have embraced the BRICS spirit of openness, inclusiveness while fostering high quality BRICS partnership and win-win cooperation to jointly tackle challenges and shape the future course of humanity. The BRICS cooperation has demonstrated resilience and has achieved sound progress and results. The BRICS Plus approach has set a fine example for developing countries to cooperate and gain strength through unity. As representative of developing countries, the BRICS countries rose to the theme to foster high quality BRICS partnership and understood the need to make the right decision and take responsible actions as their collective actions will have a significant impact on the world.